

# Aide-de-Camp's Library



सत्यमेव जयते

Rashtrapati Bhavan  
New Delhi

Accn. No. \_\_\_\_\_

Call No. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_





# DISPOSING OF HENRY



*By the same Author:*

DEATH BENEATH JERUSALEM

RED ESCAPADE

# DISPOSING OF HENRY

*by*

ROGER BAX

HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers) LTD.

LONDON : NEW YORK : MELBOURNE : SYDNEY

THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN COM-  
PLIANCE CONFORMITY WITH THE  
AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS.

Made and Printed in Great Britain by  
*Cheltenham Press Ltd.* Cheltenham and London.

# DISPOSING OF HENRY

## CHAPTER 1

IN the afternoon of a February Saturday in the year 1934, a bedroom door was cautiously pulled open from the inside at Number 13 Bolt Street, in the parish of St. Pancras, London, and a nineteen-year-old girl named Daisy Waters crept downstairs, being careful to prevent her brand new fibre suitcase from banging against the banisters. She was 'running away from home'.

For all her care she must have made some noise, for as she was about to pass the half-open parlour door her younger sister Olive stuck out an enquiring head surmounted by an unlovely Salvation Army bonnet. She noted the shiny suitcase and the fact that Daisy was wearing her smartest outdoor clothes.

"Where are you going?" asked Olive, suspiciously. She came limping out into the passage.

Daisy regarded her sister without affection. "If you must know, I'm getting out of this stinking hole."

"Getting out!—you mean you're not coming back?" Olive's eyes widened. "Ooh, I'll tell Dad."

"You can't—he's at the dogs. Anyway, mind your own business, you nosey little bitch." Daisy gave her sister a slight push, walked quickly to the front door, and slammed it behind her.

She wasn't a person you would easily overlook as she made her way down Bolt Street for the last time. The suitcase was heavy, and gave her a slight list to port, but even so you could see how well she carried herself, how confidently she held her head. She was tall and trim. Her ankles were models of what ankles should be, and her high heels clattered briskly on the pavement. Her legs were the sort that cheeky youths whistle after. Her black costume had been cut by a mass-production tailor, but it looked fine at twenty yards. Her blouse was white and clean, and above her cascading silver blonde hair, a pert black hat was perched.

As she walked, she looked neither to right nor left. Only once she stopped, to change the suitcase over from her left hand to her right, and then she went on again with the same crisp, even step.

Her lovely face was unsmiling, expressionless. There was nothing self-conscious about her exit from Bolt Street. She didn't even bother to hate it any more. She hadn't so much as a glance for the smelly old gasometer which had been the dominant feature of her landscape for nineteen years; she didn't even notice when a locomotive in the L.M.S. goods yard belched another half hundredweight or so of soot into the smutty air. She swept along without seeing the long double row of slum houses, the cracked stone steps, the paintless peeled doors, the grubby fly-postered walls with their chalked indecencies; the small dingy windows without even an aspidistra behind the lace

curtains to give them respectability. She brushed past a squabble of ragged children fighting over a rope tied to a lamp-post; she had no eyes for the old wet newspapers lying in the gutter or the scraggy scavenging cur sniffing in a garbage can. In the whole street, the only thing she noticed was a puddle in her path, and this she stepped carefully around.

As she passed number 63, the last squalid house in the sordid row, a desiccated woman peering out through almost opaque windows said to her daughter with a sniff: "There goes that stuck-up Waters girl—she'll come to no good, you mark my words."

. . . . .

There was nothing impetuous about Daisy's decision to leave home. She would have done it long before if she had had enough money. She hated her home and despised the people in it. Her father, for instance—beery and idle, sacked by the L.M.S. for drunkenness just after his marriage, wearing out his wife by giving her one child after another that he couldn't properly support, and now, at 54, unemployable, violent-tempered, ill, and living on the parish. She hated her father for what he was in general, and in particular for a fearful thrashing he had given her one Saturday night when she was sixteen and had come home late from the pictures and he, as usual, was drunk. She would never forget the pain and humiliation of that night.

Then her mother—well, she didn't hate her mother but she had no affection for her and left her without a qualm. Mrs. Waters might have been pretty and kind once, but after twenty years as the wife of Mr. Waters and the mother of his five children, she was just a frayed, nagging middle-aged slut who, in Daisy, aroused contempt rather than pity.

As for the rest of the family—the brothers and sisters—Daisy for years had had as little as possible to do with them, although she shared the same house and slept in the same bedroom as two of them. They weren't much of a credit even to Bolt Street. Tom, her eldest brother, had had no higher ambitions than to become a bricklayer's mate and to go on living at home contributing half his weekly wage to help assuage his father's thirst. Bessie, her elder sister, had a job behind the counter at a neighbouring sixpenny store and spent most of her spare time loitering in the street with local louts. Charlie had got himself into a pub fight, been called a 'disgraceful young ruffian' by the magistrate for using a broken bottle, and been sent to hard labour for twelve months. Olive, too, was a dead loss—she'd been lame and sickly ever since she'd fallen out of her pram on to a pavement at the age of ten months. She had a mean nature, which joining the Salvation Army had failed to cure.

That was the family, and as far as Daisy was concerned they could all go to hell. She was through with them.

But it wasn't only her family she was so glad to leave. More than anything, she hated Bolt Street, and Bolt Street's slum life. She

hated the dark little house with its grime and fetid smell; she hated the poor sticks of furniture and the faded peeling wallpaper and the cracked china. She hated sharing a tiny room with her two sisters. She could never get used to the bugs like the other girls. As a child she had hated Friday bath nights, when with much lack of privacy the whole family performed their ablutions, one after another, in the scullery with the help of a rusty tin bath. She was fastidious and wanted to be clean, but not that way. After she was sixteen she had begun to go once a week to the public baths.

She hated the tiny yard, backing on to other tiny yards, and smelling of the water closet. She hated the rows of washing that always seemed to be hanging out in the yard, and she hated helping with the washing because it made her hands so horrid. She hated the neighbours who carried beer down the street in jugs from the off-licence in the main road and thought she was stuck-up; she hated the consumptive Jewish dressmaker who lived at number 14 and whose painful coughing could be heard so clearly through the thin walls. "I wish she'd hurry up and die," Daisy used to think to herself, lying awake, listening.

Even as quite a small child, Daisy was inclined to solitude. Sometimes she played with other children in the street, but reluctantly, without enthusiasm, and simply because there was nothing else to do. At the central school she attended she was standoffish and unpopular with the other girls and a puzzle to her teachers. She was quiet and cold and self-contained, and she seemed to think a lot. She was often interested, but rarely warm-hearted and impulsive. Even when she quarrelled she was different. She didn't pummel or scratch or swear horrible grown-up oaths as the other Bolt Street children did; she just turned rather white round the mouth and went away, and sooner or later she got her own back.

By the time she was fifteen, she was pleasantly aware of her good looks, and the study and care of her appearance became her greatest interest. She had acquired a cheap mirror to hang on the wall over her bed, and she spent hours brushing out her wavy blonde hair, polishing and manicuring her nails, tentatively plucking an eyebrow or two or admiring her green-flecked grey eyes.

Her other main interests were things which directly bore on her appearance, or the furtherance of plans which she was already making. At school, though capable of mastering mathematical problems, she didn't like the subject and paid little attention. But she enjoyed hearing about foreign countries, and the idea of travel fascinated her. She adored dancing, and danced beautifully. As a result of weekly school visits to the baths in summer, she became a good swimmer. And, unlike most of the girls, she remembered every word of the hygiene lessons they were given. Reading, on the whole, she found a bore, but she enjoyed love stories in magazines. Her greatest literary treat, however, was to pore over a fashion paper.

From an early age, she was crazy about the pictures. She sat entranced, while handsome men made love to beautiful women in

dramas of crime and passion. In her sixteenth year, this was the school that taught her most of what she learned. Here she could discover how people behaved in the world outside Bolt Street. Here she saw and studied the changing expressions of lovely women at close quarters; she noticed how they walked, how they sat down, how they lay on a bed. She watched them seductive and watched them angry; she often practised the gestures and tricks that she liked. She learned all sorts of things about food and manners, and above all about clothes.

The cinema soon taught her to despise and correct the accent of Bolt Street. She had an ear for mimicry and copied her favourite actresses. The result, at first, was horrible. At home everyone jeered and sneered, but she only smiled disdainfully. She really didn't care, and went on practising.

She and her sister Bessie both had pictures of film stars stuck over their beds. But whereas Bessie's favourites were Clark Gable and Robert Montgomery, Daisy had a row of actresses—Claudette Colbert, Marlene Dietrich, Madeleine Carroll.

She had no time at all for boys. She looked down on Bessie for letting the local lads paw her in dark alleys. She was not innocent—the facts of life provide too great a part of slum vocabulary for that—but she was indifferent. When louts called after her, as they often did, coarsely familiar, she swept by without a flicker, her face immobile. They were scum—far, far beneath her.

When she was fourteen and had reached the normal age for leaving school, her father—eager that all his family should pay a dividend—had wanted to send her out to work. Daisy wanted to stay on at school—she was just beginning to learn the things she most desired to know—and she fought hard. She won her point by appealing, not to her father's affection but to his cupidity. She pointed out that when she was fifteen she could take a shorthand-typing course at school and that at sixteen she would be able to get a job with prospects and before long be able to make a really big contribution to the home. Mr. Waters wasn't exactly dazzled by the glittering prospects, but he grumblingly gave way. The fact was, he was rather intimidated by Daisy, except when he was drunk.

The shorthand-typing course was a great success. Daisy astonished her teacher by her application and competence. The dingy bedroom at 13 Bolt Street was now littered with shorthand notebooks and often the trio of film actresses on the wall looked down in the evenings on a platinum head bent low over hooks and strokes.

When Daisy had been working at shorthand for nearly a year she could write a hundred words a minute, and though her spelling was shaky her typing was quick and neat. Shortly before her sixteenth birthday she began to read the 'Situations Vacant' column in the *Daily Telegraph* as advised by her teacher. This was in 1931—a bad year of depression and unemployment—but Daisy felt sure she would have no difficulty in finding a job, and she was right. When she turned up for an interview one morning at the office of Prince Films Ltd. in Wardour Street, she looked just the sort of girl that

any business man would snap up. She was efficient in her test; she was extremely decorative in a youthful way; she was quiet and nicely dressed and had a pleasing low voice that didn't grate on one. Ten minutes after she had been seen by Mr. Lyons she was engaged at twenty-two shillings a week.

. . . . .

Prince Films Ltd. was a small concern run and largely owned by a Mr. Wainwright, with the assistance of Mr. Lyons, of another typist named Hilda, and a messenger boy. At one time it had been larger and more flourishing and Mr. Wainwright had produced some 'shorts' himself before the slump. Now the firm's fortunes were straitened and its activities were confined to buying up old films and renting them out cheaply to cinemas. Daisy's work consisted mainly of typing and dispatching accounts to customers; Hilda took down most of the letters and acted as Mr. Lyons' secretary.

Daisy found it a pleasant if unexciting office. Mr. Lyons was a jovial shockheaded married man of thirty who was very much absorbed by his own family and treated Daisy with the affable courtesy of a slightly preoccupied father. She hardly ever saw Mr. Wainwright, who was more often out of the office than in. Hilda was a plain plump friendly girl of 17, who came up by tram every day from Streatham. Her interests were those of a hundred thousand London typists. She admired Daisy's good looks and since Daisy had no reason whatever to dislike her, the two worked together amiably.

Daisy's horizon had now lifted a little, and at least her life wasn't bounded by Bolt Street. Of course, she still had to go back to Bolt Street every evening, but she treated it simply as a place where, for the low sum of 10s. a week paid to her mother, she could get supper, bed and breakfast. She avoided her father and exchanged no unnecessary words with her brothers and sisters.

The great problem was to make do on the balance of her wage—twelve shillings a week. Five days' lunches at an A.B.C. cost four and twopence, and five days' teas at the office cost fivepence. That left seven and fivepence a week for clothes and amusements—seven shillings when you deducted the odd coppers for bus fares on days when it was really too wet to walk to the office. Seven shillings a week—and Daisy could already have spent seven pounds a week on clothes alone with the greatest of ease. However, she wasted no energy in regretting that she wasn't better off. Instead, she hoarded her shillings and expended them only after careful thought.

Altogether, Daisy was almost three years at Prince Films, and during that time nothing much of importance happened to her except that she grew up a good deal physically. The routine of the passing weeks was rarely broken by anything more exciting than an invitation from Hilda to go with her to an inexpensive dance at Streatham. Hilda danced well in spite of her podginess and could usually find a partner, so she wasn't very jealous when the young men clustered thickly around Daisy. Daisy took their eager male rivalry quite



calmly, and as a matter of course. She surveyed her temporary suitors with an appraising eye, picked out the best, and enjoyed dancing with them. She allowed no liberties. Occasionally, when a boy had taken her out to the pictures which she loved so much, she paid for her entertainment by allowing her hand to be clasped for a few minutes. But that was all. Directly a boy became ardent, she dropped him. She knew very definitely what she wanted, and messing about in cinemas and dark streets didn't fulfil requirements. She preferred to wait.

The most important landmarks for Daisy in this period were the occasions, just before each Christmas, when Mr. Lyons called her into his office and with a wide smile raised her wages by a few shillings a week and made a few appropriate remarks about her work. The first Christmas, her rise was small—only three shillings a week—and she kept the news to herself. The second Christmas it was five shillings, and as Mr. Waters had been grumbling a good deal and saying he'd been a damn fool to let her stay at school so long, she thought it would be wise to give her mother twelve shillings a week for the Bolt Street lodging in future. The third Christmas she got another five shillings rise. By this time Hilda had gone to a better job, Daisy was doing Hilda's work, and a new slip of a girl had been engaged.

On this third occasion, Mr. Lyons looked at Daisy reflectively after he'd told her about the rise and suddenly he said, "Daisy, you've been working for me for nearly three years and I think it's time we had a meal together. What do you say?"

Daisy smiled—a smile which etched enchanting curves around her sensual mouth and made her eyes seem less hard than they usually were. "Thank you," she said. "I should like to." She spoke slowly and softly, taking care with her words. Her way of speech was settling down now. There were the rarest lapses into near Bolt Street but only when she got angry, and that hardly ever happened.

Mr. Lyons smiled at her smile. "Good—we'll work a bit late to-morrow and we'll go along to a little Greek place I know at 7.30."

"That'll be lovely," said Daisy.

She liked Mr. Lyons probably as much as she'd ever liked anybody, though that wasn't saying a great deal. He had always seemed friendly, and interested in her in a nice way; he was the best sort of boss, if you had to have a boss. She looked forward all next day to the novelty of going out with him. In the present stage of her development, a Soho restaurant was an exciting experience for her. She thoroughly enjoyed the evening when it came. They walked round the corner into Frith Street and in a quiet upper room were served with a delicious hors d'œuvres, a tasty Greek dish all very mixed up, and lots of wafer pancakes. For the first time in her life, Daisy had the pleasure of seeing a bottle of wine on the table at which she was dining. She behaved very well, talked amusingly about one or two of the firm's customers, and listened attentively when Mr. Lyons spoke. They had Turkish coffee poured out of quaint metal cups with long handles and Mr. Lyons had a little brandy with his cigar.

He puffed blue fragrant smoke into the air, sighed comfortably and sat back in his chair. "I really enjoyed that," he said. He smiled. "Well, Daisy, I want to talk about you for a bit. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least," said Daisy, very cool for nineteen.

"H'm. You've certainly grown up quite a lot since you asked me for a job nearly three years ago. You know, you've become an extremely beautiful young woman." He surveyed her dispassionately. "Extremely beautiful. There's something odd about you—as though you were keeping an awful lot to yourself."

"I *do* have private thoughts sometimes," said Daisy.

"I bet you do. Well, where do they lead you? Er—you probably realize that there's no future for you in Prince Films. We can't afford to keep you as anything but a typist, and the pay would never be much better than it is now. You ought to be thinking of making a move. Of course, maybe you'll marry. . . ."

Daisy shook her head decidedly. "Not yet. Not for ages."

"Well, you can certainly afford to take your time. What do you want to do meanwhile?"

"I want to make money—lots of money. I want to be rich and independent."

Mr. Lyons leaned back and laughed rather more loudly than was polite. As he saw her flush—and it was a rare experience—he checked his laughter and apologised. "But really," he said, "of course, everybody wants to do that. It's extremely difficult. Unless you've got money already, it's one of the most difficult things in the world—to get rich honestly." He reflected. "A while back, when Wainwright and I were making films, we could probably have used you. But now . . . Anyway, I don't recommend films. Awful struggle getting a job in the first place, then probably years of drudgery, small parts, disappointments, and nothing to show for it at the end. No, I should try something less ambitious. Ever thought of becoming a model?"

Daisy nodded slowly. "Yes, I think I could do it. But the models in the fashion pictures always look so very smart—I'm a bit scared."

"Oh, that's only the clothes. They're quite ordinary underneath. You've got the right sort of figure. I know—my wife was a model. And the pay's not at all bad. But it's your problem. I just wanted to advise you—you know, in a friendly way—to look around for something."

They left it at that and talked of other things for a while. When the time came to leave, Mr. Lyons wanted to call a taxi and put Daisy in it. But she'd thought of that possibility and she checked him quickly. "Thanks very much, but I promised to meet a girl friend at the Corner House at ten, and it's five to ten now. Goodbye. I've had a lovely time." She disappeared round a convenient corner, and then set off walking to Bolt Street. Hideous end to a nice evening—Bolt Street—but it wouldn't happen like that much longer.

The weeks that followed were busy and eventful. On Mr. Lyons' advice, Daisy again began to look through the advertisement columns of the *Daily Telegraph* and other papers, and after she'd searched for nearly a month she found what she wanted. Jones & Nicholls, the well-known West End store, were urgently requiring models. They gave measurements, and Daisy saw that hers were about right. Next morning she took time off and went for an interview. She studied the three or four other girls who were also applying, and satisfied herself that they were no smarter than she was—and not nearly as good-looking. When her turn came she was shown into an office on the fifth floor and was interviewed by a brisk smart managing woman who surveyed her carefully from all sides, made her walk up and down once or twice, instructed her in various poses, took her measurements, and finally asked her to sit down.

"I think you'll do very nicely, Miss . . .?"

"Waters."

"Ah, yes. And your first name?"

"Denise," said Daisy, very distinctly. She had decided on the way to the shop that Daisy was no name for a mannequin.

"Very pretty! Can I have your address?"

Daisy hesitated. "I'm just moving—if I get this job, you know. So as to be nearer."

The woman flashed her a quick searching glance, not unsympathetic. "Well, you'll give me your new address as soon as you move. We want it for the records. You'll find it hard work being a model. The hours are long—nine in the morning till six in the evening, and one o'clock on Saturdays. There's quite a bit to learn and when you've learned it you'll have to do a lot of sitting about. You'll be paid three pounds a week to start with, and if you're satisfactory you'll get ten shillings more after three months with us. Here's a copy of the rules of the establishment. I shall expect to see you at nine sharp on Monday morning. Please report to me here. Good morning." She smiled faintly and Daisy was dismissed.

The next few days were almost unbearably exciting. There was so much to do. Only the slenderest thread now linked Daisy with Bolt Street, and that thread was about to be broken. First, she bought a copy of *Dalton's Weekly*, and then, with the help of a reference supplied by Mr. Lyons, engaged without much trouble a small furnished bed-sitting-room (with use of bath) in Russell Square for fifteen shillings a week. She also bought a large new suitcase, which she smuggled into Bolt Street after dark and hid under her bed. On Saturday morning, when her mother was out shopping, she packed all her belongings into it.

That's how she came to be running away from home on a February Saturday afternoon. An hour later, she was letting herself into her own room in Russell Square and starting an entirely new chapter in her life as the beautiful model, Denise Waters.

## CHAPTER 2

DENISE soon discovered that she liked being a model. Apart from anything else, she adored clothes, and now she was surrounded by the finest designs that the fashions of the year could offer—and was allowed to wear them. It was, indeed, hard work, as the manageress, Mrs. Travers, had warned her it would be. Sometimes she would have to change dresses as many as thirty times a day when trade was brisk. But she was continually rewarded by the sight of herself in one of the many long mirrors as she glided gracefully across the floor in a forty-guinea evening gown or a 250-guinea fur coat. She was the ideal model, for she was quick to learn all that Mrs. Travers could teach her, she took a positive interest in the cut and quality of all the dresses, and she was sufficiently conscious of her own beauty and poise to behave—even to the least considerate customer—with cold courtesy.

The thing that irked her most about the job was having to change back into her own clothes before she left in the evenings, knowing that compared with the things she had worn during the day they were poor in material and style. However, little by little the quality of her own wardrobe improved. She found she had the best part of thirty shillings a week with which to dress herself, and by following Mrs. Travers' maxim that it was better to have a few good clothes than a lot of bad ones, she was soon able to dress herself reasonably smartly for any ordinary occasion.

Her room in Russell Square was quite a success. It was brightly, if inexpensively, furnished; it had a divan and a fairly easy chair, a small table and a reading lamp and a large wardrobe built into a corner out of the way. It was warmed by an electric fire—current extra—and there was a communal telephone downstairs in the hall. The bathroom was conveniently handy on a landing four steps up, and though a bath cost fourpence it was always a good hot one, and Denise wallowed for at least fifteen minutes every day. Compared with what she had been used to, the room was luxury. Here at least was a place of her own that was clean and bright and cosy, and that she wouldn't be afraid to invite a friend into—were she to acquire a friend.

But she still didn't make friends readily. There were four other models at the shop—Elaine, Sheila, Barbara and Vivienne—with whom she sometimes spent several hours a day sitting in underclothes and wrap in the little cubicle provided by the management as a waiting room between calls. Naturally they talked a great deal, and about all the usual things—clothes and hair styles and make-up, dances and pictures and boy friends and weekends and holidays. Denise learned a great deal, but contributed little. She had not yet acquired a background that could be talked about. She listened while Elaine, who was a retired colonel's daughter, described exciting parties she had had at Eastbourne, and Sheila told of tennis triumphs at her local club, and Vivienne, who was half French, recalled incidents from her

experience in a cosmetic shop in Paris. When they pressed her finally to tell them something about herself, she put on an air of mystery which became her quite well and said vaguely that her mother had been a Norwegian and that in her childhood they had had a lovely house at the head of Tromso Fiord—a place which she had seen pictorially advertised in a travel bureau during a walk down Piccadilly. Little by little she filled out and embellished this story, providing herself with a long-dead but previously much-respected scientist as a father and a not inconsiderable family fortune, most of which had been lost in the slump. When she was asked to talk some Norwegian she replied hurriedly that she had left Tromso when she was very small, and made a mental note that invented stories should be thought out to the end. She decided to put some thought into concocting a convincing past.

While she never became particularly friendly with any of the girls, who were inclined to be a bit jealous of her swift success and exceptional good looks and resentful of her standoffishness, the men around the shop all made a fuss of her, from the chief cashier downwards, and she was never short of someone to take her out. She went more and more to theatres and dances, and by spreading her favours evenly she contrived a succession of free dinners which helped to balance her budget. Men liked to be seen out with her in public and she was always very nice to them, so that they asked her again. But she was never *too* nice, and at twenty she was still a virgin.

It was actually nearly sixteen months after her successful interview at Jones & Nicholls that the event happened which gave the next new twist to her life. It was an early June day and something in the air filled her with a spirited restlessness. The shop had long lost its novelty, and the room at Russell Square which at first had appeared luxurious now seemed drab and depressing. She wanted a change.

It was tea-time, and the large gay restaurant on the top floor of Jones & Nicholls was about half full of customers. A four-piece band was playing light music. Denise and Vivienne had been sent, as frequently happened, to walk around the restaurant and give a demonstration of extremely becoming fifty-guinea tea gowns. Denise had paraded up and down several times among the tables and had been stopped twice by women to answer questions about the gown she was wearing. Casting a rather bored and roving eye around the room, she noticed a man sitting by himself in a far corner under the window. On her next tour, she went near enough to have a look at him. He was a big man, probably about fifty, with a fresh face, a kindly eye and a robust self-confident air. Denise noticed that he was wearing a very well-cut suit of excellent tweed. He looked prosperous and interesting. As she passed a few yards from his table, swinging her hips, he gave her a wide smile and she faintly smiled back.

She knew, as she swept on to the tables beyond, that he was looking at her carefully and when she turned to go back past him he was still looking. Apparently he liked what he saw, for as she came up to

him he gave one swift glance round the room and then said, quietly but distinctly, "Have you a telephone number?"

She stopped for a moment, appraising him. Yes, it was certainly a good suit. She said quickly "Euston 32550".

"What's your name?"

"Denise Waters." And she passed on, quite unruffled. She liked things to happen like that—everything planned and under control. Fifteen minutes later she noticed that he'd been joined by a woman, and that they were having tea. She made another round out of curiosity. The woman was also a blonde, but a synthetic one, and on the wrong side of forty. She had a thin mouth and a hard disagreeable face, and as Denise passed she heard her say 'I wish, William, you'd stop staring at that girl and hand me a cake. You really might try to be a little more attentive.'

Nothing happened during the rest of the week and Denise was beginning to think, with a slight feeling of annoyance, that her first deliberate attempt on a male was going to come to nothing. But on the Saturday afternoon, the telephone rang in the hall and when Denise answered it a man's voice said: "Is that Miss Denise Waters?"

"It is," said Denise, smiling into the receiver.

"Well—er—you may not remember me, but you gave me your telephone number at Jones & Nicholls the other afternoon."

"Did I?" said Denise. "Let me think—oh, yes, I remember—in the corner. You must be 'William'!"

The voice chuckled. "Yes, I'm William. I—er—I wondered if you'd care to come out with me for a day's drive to-morrow? Weather's so lovely. Would you like to? Run down to the coast, perhaps—have dinner at some spot and tootle back at a nice respectable hour?"

"It sounds a most attractive programme. Yes, I'd like to. I'll be ready about eleven. Will you pick me up here—19b Russell Square? Give a hoot outside and I'll come down."

"Swell!" said the voice. "I'll be there without fail. 'Bye!" And he rang off.

. . . . .

Sunday morning dawned bright and warm, with a pleasant breeze. Denise woke early, took a leisurely breakfast in bed and an equally leisurely bath. She spent an hour on her toilet and a good fifteen minutes deciding what she should wear. Finally she picked on a soft blue-green cardigan suit. It had cost her twelve guineas, with beret to match, and it looked good. She was just about ready when she heard a 'honk-honk' out in the square and peeping cautiously out of the window she saw a long low sports car with tremendous bonnet. William was gazing up at the house, and as he spotted her she waved. She kept him waiting for about five minutes and then joined him, a little green bag in her right hand and a pair of sun-glasses nonchalantly swinging in her left.

William gazed at her with unconcealed admiration. "You look stunning," he said. "By the way, my name is Pargeter. Just as well

you should know, eh? William Faulkner Pargeter." He held the door open for her. "I say, I think I'm going to enjoy to-day. Is there anywhere special you'd like to go?"

"I leave that entirely to you," said Denise, settling herself in the comfortable bucket seat. She wanted to say "What a lovely car," but checked herself, and William said it for her.

"Like the old bus? She's a four-and-a-half litre job. Absolute dream to drive. Cost a fortune. I'll show you her paces when we get out of town."

For the next couple of hours Denise was in heaven. This, she decided, was the right way to see the country; the wrong way was to crawl out of town in buses and slow suburban trains and then walk, as she had known other people do. As they ran over the North Downs and dropped into the Kentish Weald she looked constantly around, admiring the views and pointing from time to time at an oast house or a farm or a clump of trees that she particularly liked. She was beginning to think she must see more of the country, which was almost a new world to her. Neither of them talked much, for William drove rather fast and the rushing wind made conversation difficult. Occasionally, she glanced at his intent face and decided that he really looked nice. His hair was definitely greying over his left ear, but on reflection she thought he wasn't quite as old as he had seemed at first; probably not more than forty-five.

It wasn't till they were having lunch in the Mermaid Inn at Rye that Pargeter began to talk. "Well, young lady, are you glad you gave me your telephone number?"

"It's a bit early to say," said Denise cautiously.

"Don't you believe it! I can see we're going to have grand times together. Good job my wife can't see me, that's the only thing. That was my wife in the restaurant, you know."

"I imagined so."

"We don't get along very well. She doesn't understand that a fellow's got to have a bit of fun occasionally, particularly when he's my age. Now or never, that's what I say. She was buying clothes. Usually I manage to leave her behind. Did I tell you I had a place in Upshire? Small place—just a couple of hundred acres, but nice. Very select county, Upshire. Oh, yes, I'm quite the country gentleman! Justice of the Peace and all that. Most respected!" He gave a throaty bass laugh.

"Are you often in town?"

"Well, two or three times a week. I'm a company director, you see—four big companies. Housing estates. I've got what they call a flair for development. You know the sort of thing—find an unspoiled beauty spot, not really enjoyed by anyone—buy it up, lay nice concrete roads, plant trees along them, build a few hundred villas—nice villas—and clear a tidy profit. It's a paying proposition, I can tell you, as well as a public service. But, mind you, you need ideas. There's a lot of competition and you've got to choose the right spot and give it attractive features. Tudor pubs are my line—I've built four Tudor

pubs in Surrey that compare with anything in the country. You've got to provide amenities these days. Pubs and cinemas. Then people'll come. You heard of the Good Friendship Estate in Hertfordshire? I cleared a cool seventy thousand pounds on that piece of development."

"Really!" said Denise, looking at Mr. Pargeter with steadily increasing interest.

"Yes," he went on, filling Denise's wineglass and taking a big swallow of pale ale from his pint tankard. "Mind you, I don't take any particular credit for it. It's just that I've got a nose for business. Always had. I went into an estate agent's office when I was sixteen and never looked back. You should have seen me selling houses. Made them sound like celestial mansions. Of course, you get tired of villas. That's why I went to Upshire—it's a really classy county. Bought a fourteenth century manor house—converted, you know. You should see the chimneys. My wife complains—says they're draughty. But then, she's always complaining."

"I suppose you find it a nice change to come to town?"

"I certainly do. Got a few pals, you know—fellow directors. Always plenty to talk about—new schemes. See a bit of life, too!" She almost expected him to wink but he didn't—quite. "Nothing like dinner and a theatre with a pretty girl. And, if you don't mind me saying so, you certainly are the loveliest girl I've ever seen off the screen. You're a peach!"

Denise smiled. "You may like the look of me, Mr. Pargeter, but you know nothing at all about me."

William looked quite surprised. "No, I don't, do I? I seem to have been doing all the talking. Usually do when I get away from my wife. Tell me about yourself?"

"My mother was Norwegian," said Denise demurely. "That's where I got my blonde hair from. Do you know Norway—we used to have a house at a place called Tromsø Fiord."

"You don't say? I once went on a cruise up there—forty-five guineas for eight days, but I must say they did us well. That was before I was married—we had some rare larks on the ship, I can tell you. Those fiords are lovely—you could build some fine estates up there if you could think of some way the people could earn a living. . . ."

By now Denise had Mr. Pargeter pretty well sized up. There was only one thing she wanted from him, and she had a pretty shrewd idea there was only one thing he wanted from her. Later in the day, after they'd toured a big stretch of the south coast, dined in comfort and drifted gently home in the stream of Sunday night traffic with his arm lying unobtrusively around her shoulder, she had no doubt of it. He suddenly said "You know, this has been a real swell day. What about being a bit more ambitious next time, eh? How'd you like a weekend at Bournemouth—really slap-up? Go down Saturday mid-day and come back Sunday night. Have a spot of dancing? What do you say?"



Denise looked at Mr. Pargeter's eager face, at Mr. Pargeter's expensive tweeds, and at the shining bonnet of Mr. Pargeter's lovely car, and she nestled a bit closer against his encircling arm and said: "It sounds a very nice idea."

. . .

On the whole, the Bournemouth weekend was highly successful. Mr. Pargeter gave the impression of having the situation well in hand from the beginning. They had tea at Ringwood in a pretty garden, admired the New Forest (which Mr. Pargeter thought would 'develop' splendidly) and arrived at the 'Hotel Magnificent' in comfortable time to change for dinner. Mr. Pargeter had reserved a suite in the name of Mr. and Mrs. Hemingway and he behaved with such assurance that Denise felt quite certain she was by no means the first Mrs. Hemingway. However, she preferred things to go smoothly. The suite was perfect, the bathroom was a heavenly vision and the view from the windows across the pine trees to the sea was exquisite. Of course, William grabbed her as soon as they were alone, but he did it quite efficiently and she submitted readily to a few kisses. William went off to dress in high good humour.

Dinner was grand fun. The food was adequate, the champagne was delicious and the dance band was famous. They danced a good deal. Mr. Pargeter wasn't very elegant on the floor but at least he kept good time. In between dances he talked almost without a break, and mostly about himself. That suited Denise, who was thoroughly enjoying herself watching through a pleasant alcoholic haze how other people behaved, and basking in the admiring glances of strange men.

They went up to their room shortly before midnight and by morning Denise had ceased to be a virgin. She found it an uncomfortable but not uninteresting metamorphosis and reflected that since it had had to happen sooner or later, she had been really wise to wait for a man who could make it worth her while. Mr. Pargeter was astonished, but rather impressed and flattered, to find her so inexperienced. He seemed unusually quiet on the way back on Sunday evening and after dinner, which they ate at a roadhouse near Guildford, he came out with what was on his mind.

"What about you and me setting up a little establishment, eh, Denise? I guess we suit each other pretty well, and you're the sweetest thing I've met in years. I like you, and when I like somebody I don't mind spending a bit of cash on them. Now I suggest I take a nice flat for you—a really nice one—say in one of those swell new blocks in Piccadilly, and pay you two hundred and fifty a year allowance. You know, for keeping house for me and having the place snug when I come to town. That's only fair. What do you say, little girl?"

Denise felt as though she wanted to purr. Everything was turning out so satisfactorily. A vista of near-wealth opened before her—and all because she'd been careful and played her cards well and waited for her moment. She said "William, you're a dear. . . . But suppose I get tired of you?"

William gave his bass guffaw. "That's all right," he said. "Women don't get tired of me."

. . . . .

During the next week or two, Denise moved rapidly up in the world. At Mr. Pargeter's suggestion, she opened a bank account and mastered the simple details connected with it. William showed himself a cautious paramour. He pointed out the risks which would attach to him domestically if he paid cheques into her account. "My wife would divorce me like a shot if she had evidence and thought she could get a substantial allowance," he said, "and then think of the scandal in Upshire. J.P. and all that. Better be careful." So every time he saw her he gave her money, and she paid it into her bank. She rather enjoyed the atmosphere of mild conspiracy. She also chose the flat. It was in a new block opposite the Green Park, and it had everything—central heating and conditioned air, refrigerator and cocktail cabinet, an overall carpet with a luxurious pile, beds as soft as a cloud, a bathroom with a sunken bath of pale green porcelain and every sort of gadget including even a pale green telephone which she could reach without getting out of the bath. She could have a meal sent up to the flat of such excellence that it really seemed an unnecessary effort to eat anywhere else. It was a flat where the service was so complete that there was nothing left for the tenant to do except enjoy herself. Of course, the 'extras' were considerable, but William seemed willing, even anxious, to regard them all as part of the cost of the flat. He had a look at the place before Denise signed the contract, and described it as "a very cosy little nest."

Whatever William's faults—and Denise was sensitive about other people's faults—he had the outstanding virtue of generosity. On his fourth visit to the flat, he produced an extremely attractive rope of pearls which she felt she wouldn't be ashamed to wear in any company. He was very proud of her, and loved the occasional visits they paid to the Savoy and the Ritz for dinner and a dance. "Bit of a risk," he said, "but it's worth it." But mostly they spent their evenings together in quiet luxury in Piccadilly.

Though William admired her, he showed no sign of losing his head. He liked to think she was faithful to him, as she was, but he wasn't in love with her. He was too fond of himself for that. He regarded her as a very satisfactory investment. Business remained his chief interest—business, and the more difficult task of acquiring status in the county of Upshire. He told her with pride of his commonsense on the Bench. "Trouble with most of these magistrates," he said, "is that they don't get about enough. You need a man of the world to set 'em right." He also used to tell her with boyish glee of the county functions he was occasionally invited to attend, and of the county snobs he couldn't get along with. "Some of them are downright rude," he said. "Call themselves big pots and give themselves airs just because they've inherited thousands of acres. I'd like to develop some of *their* estates for them."

Sometimes Denise got very bored with William, and then she was glad that he turned up in town only once or twice a week. She had plenty to do on her own—so much, indeed, that after a few weeks she gave up her job at Jones & Nicholls. For one thing, she found that being a model made her tired, and when she was tired she couldn't do justice to William. For another, she just didn't have the time to spare. There was so much to do at the new flat. It was so comfortable in bed that she always had breakfast served there. By the time she'd glanced at the headlines of the *Daily Mirror* and perhaps skimmed through a magazine story over her coffee, it was often eleven o'clock. Then she had to make full use of that wonderful bathroom, and dress, and there was always shopping and deciding where to lunch, and perhaps a cinema in the afternoon and the *Sphere* and *Tatler* to read in odd moments. It gave her intense pleasure to turn the tables on her past, and go to dress shows instead of working in them. She had a costly radiogram but could never seem to find enough time to choose all the new dance records she wanted. Altogether, her life was very full indeed and the months slipped by almost unnoticed. William showed no sign of tiring—if anything his ardour was increasing. Denise added a fur coat to her wardrobe—she still hoped for a mink one day—and a diamond ring to her growing collection of jewellery. For her part, she did all that was required of her. William was an experienced lover and taught her a great many things. She was an apt and, presently, an eager pupil. The nest became very cosy indeed.

Too cosy! About eight months after their first meeting Denise was glancing through her private diary when she was suddenly struck by something very unpleasant. She made some rapid and increasingly panicky calculations. When she had made all possible allowances for error and delay, she had to face the fact that something had gone very wrong. There seemed a distinct likelihood that she was pregnant. Somehow, she had made the mistake that many far more sophisticated women had made before her.

The prospect which now faced her was most unappealing. Her life of idle luxury was threatened. As a pregnant woman, she would be to William an unattractive and exasperating encumbrance. Even if she somehow got rid of the child right away, she could not count on her relationship with William remaining the same. She would probably be ill, and he would get tired of the whole affair. She might lose the flat and her allowance. She cursed herself, and she cursed William even more. The clumsy fool! If she wasn't careful, she might find herself little better off than the stupid sluts she'd often despised in Bolt Street.

Obviously she must do something about it, and quickly—but what? She had no girl friends, and at twenty-one she was still lamentably ignorant. The only thing to do was to tell William, who would certainly know about these things. She lived through three wretched days until his next visit and then, almost before he was through the

door, she burst out: "I think I'm going to have a baby." She was thoroughly scared.

William's mouth fell open and he gazed at her in horror. "Good God, you can't do that," he said.

"I tell you I'm going to. We'll have to do something about it. It's entirely your fault—you always said everything would be all right. I wish I'd had the sense to look after myself."

William still looked a bit shaken. "Have you tried taking anything?" he asked, hastily pouring himself out a whisky.

"No—I've only just found out. And I don't know what to take. I thought you'd know."

"Of course I know! Oh, lord, what a mess! Anyway it probably won't work. Never does—women are too damned healthy. I'll get some stuff to-morrow, but I warn you it'll make you feel pretty bad."

They discussed the matter for some time. Denise was in a foul temper and William, who had never seen her with the veneer off, became gloomier and gloomier. Finally he became angry too and went off to sleep at his club. Denise lay awake for a long time, thinking.

The 'stuff' arrived next morning and Denise took it. She went on taking it, with growing irritation and anxiety, but nothing happened except that she felt frightful. Finally, after a couple of weeks of acute discomfort, she gave it up.

"Too bad," said William. "Well, we'll have to fix it. I think I know a man who will do it. Damned nuisance, though."

"It's more than a nuisance," said Denise viciously. "I hate being hurt, and I know this is going to hurt a lot. It's all very well for you to take it so calmly. You men are all alike. I'll probably be ill and it'll spoil my figure and make me look ten years older."

"Oh, come now," said William. "You really are laying it on a bit thick. I realize it won't be nice for you and I'm sorry. Guess I should have been more careful. But it has happened to other people, you know."

Denise flared up again. "Oh, I'm sure it's happened in your experience very often. That doesn't make it any pleasanter. Anyway, please understand that I want it done properly. I'm not going to any dirty quack. The best nursing home in the West End! The best surgeon you can bribe to do it! I know it'll cost a great deal, but you can easily afford it."

"I'm not absolutely *made* of money." William grumbled. "This flat has cost me a great deal. So have you. Wish you'd try and be a bit more reasonable."

Little white patches appeared round Denise's mouth—a warning signal that William hadn't seen before. He seemed to be learning more about her in these few days than he had discovered in all the months he'd known her.

"I *advise* you, William," she said in a very cold even voice, "to arrange things for me very nicely. I advise you to go to a *lot* of trouble arranging them. Otherwise . . ."

"All right, all right," he said. "There's no need to get shirty. I'm quite prepared to do the decent thing. Don't you worry—you just leave it to me. I'll fix it."

. . . . .

The next few weeks were just as unpleasant as the previous eight months had been delightful. The luxury flat and the idle life had temporarily lost their appeal. Denise was very frightened. She had always been able to stand physical discomfort better in other people than in herself. She had heard horrible stories about what could happen on these occasions. She might die, and she very much wanted to live. William, on the now far rarer occasions when he saw her, thought she was displaying a marked lack of guts. Naturally, he didn't dare say so.

The event itself went much more smoothly than Denise had expected. First a very discreet examination by a surgeon who asked no questions and merely said "Of course, you understand you mustn't talk about this." Then some not unpleasant days in a very select private nursing home which specialized in appendicitis operations for the erring rich. Denise was just beginning to congratulate herself that she was through the worst when complications set in and she became really ill. William sent her flowers and grapes and came to visit her once or twice, but seeing him gave her no pleasure. The fact that he was really behaving quite well irritated her. As she lay in bed, gradually recovering her strength, she thought a great deal, and she came to the conclusion that she must find a way of achieving much more independence than an allowance from William gave her. It was humiliating and dangerous to depend on a man for money.

Three weeks later she was able to return to the flat in Piccadilly. She had lost a good deal of weight, her face was pale, and there were heavy rings under her eyes. She had only one cause for satisfaction—before she had left the nursing home they had told her that what had just happened couldn't happen again. She could have no children. That, at least, was a worry out of the way. The main thing now was to safeguard her future financially, and that meant getting to work on William.

### CHAPTER 3

A WEEK later William came to the flat again. He seemed tired. He expressed relief at Denise's recovery and politely insisted that she was looking almost her old self again, but his general attitude was pre-occupied. It was evident that he had something on his mind, and Denise had a pretty good idea what it was. She decided to get her own blow in first.

As soon as he was comfortably settled in an easy chair with a whisky and soda beside him she opened her offensive from the divan in the classic fashion—by reconnaissance.

"William," she said, "while I was in the nursing home I thought a good deal about your work—you know, your development schemes. Are they always successful?"

William looked at her in surprise. "Funny question. Didn't know you were interested. Why yes, usually. Mostly very successful."

"Don't you ever lose money on a scheme? Doesn't anything ever go wrong?"

William still didn't see what she was driving at. "Well, occasionally I have a stroke of bad luck, like everybody else. There was the Good Fellowship Estate in Essex a few years ago—a complete flop, but it wasn't my fault. We were just beginning to get the houses up when there was a bad typhoid epidemic—sewage got into the water or something, awful row at the time—and of course the place got a bad name. Even so I only dropped about five thousand on the deal."

"Did it upset you terribly?"

"I didn't like it. Never nice to lose a cool five thousand. Still, I soon made it up on other things."

Denise settled herself more comfortably and took a long breath. "So, if you were to give me five thousand pounds it wouldn't worry you too much?"

William didn't jump. He just stared at her as though she were crazy. "Give you five thousand?" he said.

"Yes, William. You heard!"

William's fleshy face grew red. "Just what exactly is the idea?"

"Simply this. I don't want to go on with this flat any more, and I don't think you do. It was nice while it lasted, but things went wrong. I've had a bad time. I need a long rest and a holiday. That'll cost money. So I suggest you give me five thousand pounds, and we'll call it a day."

William lost his temper. "You're off your head! I'll give you two hundred pounds to take yourself off—and I hope it's for good!"

"Two hundred pounds! You forget that I gave up my job for you, and that because of what you did to me I'd be no good at it now. Do you know I can't have any children? You've practically wrecked my life, and you offer me a miserable two hundred pounds?"

"You're a filthy little gold-digger," said William, his usually composed face working with anger. "In your line of business you'd *never* lack a job."

"How dare you?" The little white marks were back round Denise's mouth. "Now you'll pay every single penny of that five thousand."

"I won't pay a farthing."

"Very well—I can't starve. I shall have to write to your wife and ask her for help!"

There was a horrid silence. William slowly subsided into his chair. "You—— blackmailer!"

"Not at all. I'm not threatening you. All I'm saying is that to compensate for the harm you've done me, I need not less than five thousand pounds, and from a rich man like you I have a right to expect it. If you're too mean to do the proper thing, I've got to go to somebody who'll understand. I think your wife *would* understand."

"I've a good mind to call the police," said William.

"And tell them what? That you, a respected Justice of the Peace, have been keeping a mistress; that you got her into trouble, arranged an abortion for her and now want to clear off and leave her in the lurch without paying for your fun. I can just see you doing it."

"You devil. I'd like to. . . ."

"Now who's threatening? William, you might just as well give in. It's simply not worth your while to make a fuss for five thousand. What does it mean to you, after all? You won't have to go without anything. You'll still be able to afford to keep this flat on, and find somebody else to amuse you—though I hope you'll be more careful next time."

William sat with his head in his hands, thinking. He could see, only too clearly, the course that events might take. A letter to his wife, a fearful domestic row, an investigation. More than ample evidence from the porter at the flats and from various hotels and inns. A divorce case, crippling alimony to his wife, publicity and scandal in Upshire, resignation from the Bench—his whole life messed up. What a fool he'd been! Five thousand was outrageous—but it was true he could easily afford it. It would be a cheap price to pay for getting clean out of this mess. But would he get clean out. . . ."

He looked across at Denise, who was watching him closely, impassively. He felt wretched, used up. He said, "How do I know that you won't come back and try to blackmail me again?"

"I wish you wouldn't use that word. I shan't come back because I shan't need you. I've got other plans. I shall go and live in the South of France—I've always liked the look of the posters. I shall have a nice long rest, and then I shall probably get married. I shall marry a very rich man, and I shall live happily and respectably ever after."

"I see—got it all planned out! You're the hardest, coldest, most calculating little bitch I've ever come across. How glad I'll be to see the last of you!"

"And the five thousand?"

"All right, you'll get it. I'll have to think of a way of paying it to you so that it's safe. And much good may it do you." William stood up. "Just one more thing. I'm being a damn fool—paying out good money when I ought to send you to jail. I'm doing it because I haven't the guts to stand the racket. But there's such a thing as

desperation. If you ever ask me for another bean I'll see you locked up as sure as my name's William Pargeter."

It wasn't much of an exit, but he did look as though he meant it.

Now Denise was on top of the world once more. She had no entanglements of any sort and she had enough money to last her, even at her high rate of spending, for two or three years at least.

She felt that she had every reason to be pleased with herself. She had got out of her jam by being resourceful and tough. Her self-confidence was greater than ever. As for that poor fish William, she didn't give him another thought.

She had nothing to do now but plan her departure from London. She always found making plans an enthralling occupation. She loved anything to do with packing and clothes and tickets and hotels. She had often dreamed about a life crowded with such things. Now the dream was coming true.

She spent a delightful half-hour in the travel bureau in Piccadilly discussing with a susceptible but efficient young man alternative ways of getting to the Riviera. If she went straight through Paris, she could buy clothes on the way. On the other hand, she had heard that there was nothing like a sea voyage to put you on your feet after an illness and she could always run up to Paris any time. In the end, she instructed him to reserve first class accommodation for her on the Orient liner *Orama*, which was scheduled to sail from Tilbury in early April and touch at Villefranche a week or so later.

Before she left London she wound up her affairs at the flat. She had an orderly mind and didn't like loose ends. When the time came for the ship to sail, she felt she hadn't a care in the world.

From the moment the boat train pulled out of St. Pancras, vivid impressions crowded in on her. With fascination she gazed from her corner seat in the first-class Pullman upon the slums of north-east London, and realized that she was only a few hundred yards from Bolt Street. She could have hugged herself. If she'd been like other people, she might still be living in one of those ghastly hovels. As it was, she was a tastefully dressed young woman of great personal attraction and independent means, travelling luxuriously southwards in search of sunshine and adventure.

Her first sight of the 20,000 ton liner towering above the quay at Tilbury increased her excitement. She had seen plenty of ocean travel on the pictures, of course, and she was careful not to goggle. But she found everything new and strange and incredibly wonderful.

Her one worry was that she might be sea-sick, but she wasn't. The weather was mild and showery, and the sea quiet. For the first few days she didn't mix much with the rest of the passengers. She slept a great deal, and ate heartily, and read a number of light novels from the ship's library. When they turned south, and the sun got warmer, she allowed her steward to wrap her up with rugs in a deck chair out in the open and waited for an unattached male to make advances.



She didn't have to wait long. A good-looking young naval officer asked permission to join her and she graciously allowed him to talk to her. He was going out to join his ship at Alexandria. She liked him quite a lot but he was living on his pay. However, he bought her drinks in the bar, played quoits with her on the sports deck, took gentle exercises with her on the promenade deck, kissed her on the boat deck and escorted her ashore at Gibraltar where they had a wonderful time exploring together. By Toulon he was madly in love with her, which was rather gratifying, and the night before they reached Villefranche he asked her to marry him. She turned him down with some amusement and next day disembarked on the sun-bathed Riviera coast having almost re-gained her normal health and beauty. It had been a most satisfactory trip.

During the next few weeks she explored in turn most of the Riviera resorts from Cannes to Mentone. She intended to settle down soon, but there was no hurry. Wherever she went there was something new and exciting to see. She became acquainted with several men, but didn't take any of them at all seriously, for most of them had small incomes and predatory intentions, and she was in a good position to recognize the type.

She visited the Casino at Monte Carlo to see what it was like, and spent a modest five hundred francs finding out. She noted with hard intelligent eyes the frayed cuffs and worn heels of the habitués; the scruffy little men and slatternly women who shuffled about the public rooms with blunt pencils and dirty scraps of paper, playing roulette to a system. She watched a young man try to make a quick fortune by 'doubling up' on black, and she observed without pity his desperate misery as he left, defeated, after red had turned up nine times running. After that, she lost interest in the Casino. She had much too much sense to gamble.

Towards the end of May, she called at a house agent's in Nice and said she would like to rent a small villa with a view of the coast somewhere between Monte Carlo and Mentone. Another young man—surprisingly like the one in the travel offices in Piccadilly except that he spoke French as well as English—showed her over several attractive properties which were available at very reasonable rentals because Mussolini's Abyssinian ambitions had scared a lot of people away from the Mediterranean that summer. Denise, who had barely heard of Mussolini and knew nothing of international politics, was undeterred, and chose an elegant six-room house on Cap Martin with a pleasant verandah and a small private bathing beach. With the assistance of the young man, whom she suitably rewarded, she also acquired a smart little Renault, a cook, and a maid. The maid was pertly pretty, and was called Annette. Having laid the foundations of life as a respectable single young woman with a private income, she moved into her new home, named 'Lavandou', and settled down to laze away the summer and see what happened.

She wasn't in the least bored. She swam and sun-bathed, taking good care not to scorch her delicate skin; she learned to drive the

Renault; she discovered that there were some quite good dress shows in Nice and that not all the films there were French. She found French magazines more stimulating than English. She paid one brief visit to Paris and bought some very nice additions to her wardrobe. Cook was a treasure, and Annette grew very fond of her lovely mistress. It was quite a little idyll.

So the months passed pleasantly until September, and then once again Denise began to get restless. She had run through quite a lot of money, and decided it was time she began making some contacts. She started to accept invitations to tea from ladies of sound local repute, and she returned their hospitality. They all thought she was a very charming girl. Soon she was dining and dancing at some of the most select houses, and always she behaved with the greatest discretion.

. . . . .

Early in October she was taking coffee in bed one morning when she noticed an intriguing little gossip paragraph in one of the Riviera snob papers. It said: "Among the visitors who are to attend the 12th International Entomological Conference at Nice next week, one of the most distinguished will be Mr. Henry Wycherley, the well-known lepidopterist. Mr. Wycherley is the third son of the late George R. Wycherley and is reputed to be worth a quarter of a million pounds. He is a bachelor."

Denise put her coffee cup down with a clatter, and read this through twice. Then she called out "Annette, bring me a dictionary."

The result of her researches was disappointing. A conference about insects and an expert on butterflies! Butterflies were pretty, of course, but she'd hated insects ever since the bug-ridden days of Bolt Street. However, these, after all, were secondary matters. The primary matters were Mr. Wycherley's reputed fortune, and the fact that he was a bachelor.

Denise was now in her element. There was a campaign to be planned, with money as the goal. She realized from the beginning that this was going to be by far the most ambitious venture of her career. Henry Wycherley was obviously a very knowledgeable man, even if the confines of his knowledge were narrow. He would be a man of taste and culture. He would notice little things that William had never noticed. With all that money, he would no doubt be on his guard against adventures, and she would have to make it clear that she wasn't one. Marriage was a very serious thing for a man in his position. She would have to move very warily, and watch her step.

She reflected, with complacency, that she had an unsullied reputation everywhere. What she lacked was a pedigree. Her thoughts reverted to Tromso Fiord. A Norwegian mother—that was all right. Norway was an estimable country. Her mother had been—what?—a minister's daughter—no, that was a bit too much. A farmer's daughter. That was respectable enough. Denise's recollections of

her old grandfather were hazy. All she remembered was the funny old hat he used to wear!

She had come to England—why had she come to England? Obviously because her father was English. He was an arctic explorer—a minor one. He had met her mother at Tromsø when he put in there on his way back from one of his voyages. He had died of pneumonia when Denise was three. He had had property in England. Her mother had taken Denise to England to see about the property and liked the county so much, she'd stayed. Where did they live? Kensington—an old house. Modestly, because their income wasn't big. The property had lost value in the slump. Denise had inherited the balance of it. Her mother had died. She knew nothing about any relations—she'd lost sight of them after her father died. And there was really no reason why she shouldn't have been a model—it was a most respectable profession.

Denise poured herself out another cup of coffee, and contemplated the framework of her past existence with some pride. It would be quite fun filling in the gaps—if it ever became necessary. In the meantime, she must find some way of contacting Mr. Wycherley.

. . . . .

It seemed to Denise that the only practicable way to bring about a meeting was to sound out her acquaintances and try to secure a formal introduction. It was a rather dreary prospect, and in any case she knew the difficulty of making a deep personal impression at casual social gatherings, unless they were very small ones. The Conference might last only a few days, so that whatever was going to be done would have to be done quickly.

Suddenly an unexpected opportunity presented itself. The *Journal de Nice* announced one evening that, concurrently with the Conference, there would be a series of popular afternoon lectures in the town by some of the Conference experts. One of these lectures, advertised under the title of "The Romance of the Butterfly," would be given by Mr. Henry Wycherley. A reserved seat cost fifty francs and the proceeds were to be given to charity.

On Wednesday afternoon, Denise dressed herself carefully in a smart black suit with a chaste white collar and a sailor hat tipped at a saucy angle and drove herself into Nice in a state of controlled excitement. She found the hall without difficulty—her French, after six months, was good enough to enable her to enquire the way—and she took her seat in the front row. There appeared to be only one or two other people there whom she knew and they were of no particular consequence. Apparently neither the native nor the visiting population of Nice had any great passion for butterflies. As the advertised time of the meeting came round, the small hall was still only about a third full.

Denise was sitting almost directly in front of the platform and she had an excellent view. There was a hush of expectancy as two gentlemen came in and took their places at the table. One was tall, good-

looking and formidable. The other was a little man with a bird-like expression and greying hair. One of them was the chairman; the other was Mr. Wycherley. The question was, which was which? In a few moments the formidable man rose and began speaking. The little bird-like man was Mr. Wycherley.

Denise now inspected him more closely. He certainly wasn't much to look at, and she began to understand why he was still a bachelor. His air was diffident and his appearance professorial. His clothes hung on him loosely, as though he'd recently lost weight. His wrists were skinny and his hair was beginning to get thin on top. He kept twiddling a pencil while the chairman spoke. Once she caught his eye and, without particularly intending to, gave him her shadowy smile. He seemed quite pleased and beamed at her, like a nervous parson who had just established contact with one of his flock. She thought he looked rather lonely. Her confidence increased.

In a few moments the chairman called upon him, there was a little very desultory clapping, and he began to speak. He had a quiet, pleasant voice—a bit hesitant, but friendly. He had a mannerism which Denise decided would be irritating in a husband—every few sentences he slightly cleared his throat with a sound like 'H'm.'. He was unusually small—he really couldn't be more than five feet four.

She tried to listen to what he was saying, and occasionally to catch his eye again with an interested glance. She heard him say something about the word 'lepidoptera' coming from two Greek words meaning 'scales' and 'wings'. He hadn't any notes and lectured very conversationally. He said that the dust on butterflies' wings wasn't really dust at all, but tiny scales of a special shape. Here he fumbled in his pocket for a piece of paper and drew a little oval diagram which he held up for inspection. Altogether, he said, there were about 80,000 different species of butterfly and moth. An appropriate gasp of surprise was drawn from his audience. He said that butterflies sucked their food through tiny tubes, which they curled up like a watch-spring when not in use. He was a treasury of information. He disclosed that butterflies could hear the beating of each other's wings and referred rather delicately to the fact that some butterfly he called 'Vanessa' had such a remarkable sense of smell that it had been known to fly up against the wind in chase of a female freshly emerged from the chrysalis. He described various rare and unusual sorts of lepidoptera, including a moth that he said had a wing-spread of ten inches. He spoke for about half an hour, and then invited questions.

Denise felt that her moment had come. Switching on all her charm from her seat a few feet below him, she said in her rich low voice: "I suppose butterflies don't have any teeth?" It sounded a very odd question as she asked it, but Mr. Wycherley seemed delighted.

"Oh, yes, they do," he assured her, his head slightly on one side, just like a bird. "There are some moths that have quite sharp spiny teeth which they use to lacerate the rind of fruit."

Denise smiled and said "Thank you." There were no more questions but someone at the back rather long-windedly moved a vote.

of thanks to the speaker and there was a little more clapping. Then the meeting broke up.

Someone went up to the chairman—apparently an acquaintance—and began talking to him. Mr. Wycherley stood rather uncertainly, twiddling his pencil again. Denise moved forward and caught his eye. He smiled again.

"I did just want to thank you for your lecture," she said. Mr. Wycherley made the appropriate self-depreciating gesture. "I was so interested in what you said about that big moth. It seems impossible to believe it could have wings ten inches wide."

"Oh, but it has, I assure you. I know because I actually caught a perfect example myself in Madagascar."

"How very exciting! I'd love to see one. I've always been keen on butterflies." Mr. Wycherley glanced round the rapidly emptying room. "As a matter of fact," he said confidentially, "if you're really interested I could show you the one I caught. I brought it along as an exhibit to the Conference and it's in my room now. It's a beautiful specimen. . . . But perhaps you're in a hurry?"

"Not at all. It would be a great privilege. But you must be terribly busy—are you sure I won't be bothering you?"

"On the contrary." He smiled his diffident charming smile. "I'm afraid I always like showing my specimens. My hotel is only a couple of streets away—we can walk there."

"I've got a car outside," said Denise, "if you can trust my driving."

"Oh, that's better still. It's so hot for walking here, isn't it?" He waved a hand to his chairman and climbed down from the platform. The top of his head came hardly above her eyes.

She held the door of the little Renault open for him and he climbed in. He was bare-headed and looked rather like a small boy being taken for a ride. She parked the car neatly near the Riviera Hotel and he led the way to a comfortable suite on the third floor with a balcony overlooking the sea.

They had hardly entered the apartment before Mr. Wycherley was diving into a drawer and producing a heavy mahogany case which he carried carefully to the table. "Perhaps you'd care for a cup of tea?" he said. "Nice is such a thirsty place. We'll have it on the balcony—the breeze is pleasant." He rang for the waiter. "And now let me show you 'Ophideres Imperator'. It's a real beauty."

It was as easy as all that.

## CHAPTER 4

DENISE, delicately sipping tea on Mr. Wycherley's balcony, was determined to lay firm foundations before she began to build on them. Her first task was to look beautiful, and this was the easiest. She

was certainly lovelier, she reflected, than any butterfly or moth, and Mr. Wycherley—who had gone into mild raptures over the wing colouring of 'Ophideres Imperator'—could hardly regard her with anything but pleasure.

She also had to sustain an appearance of interest in his enthusiasms without gushing, to establish something more than a mere nodding acquaintance, and at the same time not stay longer than was seemly on a first occasion. It was all rather difficult.

Fortunately for Denise, Mr. Wycherley—like many scientists—was an unconventional and slightly eccentric little man. He was used to following his rather ascetic inclinations wherever they led him. He was as friendly as a dog, and quite unsuspecting. His brown eyes were kindly behind their pince-nez and his smile was warm. It was easy to get on with him.

Naturally, Mr. Wycherley went on talking about butterflies for quite a time and then Denise asked him about Madagascar and for the next few minutes all she had to do was to utter suitable exclamations of admiration and surprise over his adventures. Then Denise asked if she might pour him out a second cup of tea and when he said "Thank you very much" and looked pleased she poured herself out one too. After that they talked a bit about the Riviera and Denise asked whether he was enjoying his stay in Nice.

"Yes," he said, "the Conference has been most instructive. I shall be quite sorry when it's over. But, you know, I hate hotels. I like quiet places, and no-one could call Nice quiet. Do you know, I've agreed to go to a cocktail party or to dine out every evening this week, and I don't really want to a bit." He looked quite pathetic. "I've been surprised how many people seem to know me."

Denise avoided the obvious, for he was certainly not fishing for compliments. Instead, she seized the opening he had given her, though with becoming hesitation. "I wonder if you'd care to leave Nice for an afternoon? I have a little house a few miles along the coast, with a very pretty beach. It's really delightful having tea down there by the sea. I could pick you up. . . ."

Mr. Wycherley looked at her with new interest. This charming young woman really wanted to see him again. "That's the nicest suggestion I've heard since I came here, Miss . . . er . . . dear me, I'm afraid I don't know your name."

Denise laughed. "I'm sorry. I'm disgracefully unconventional. I really do apologise for being so forward. My name's Denise Waters."

"Well, er—Miss Waters—I really am tempted to accept your very kind invitation. May I bring my butterfly net?"

"Why, of course—perhaps we'll catch a new specimen. Tomorrow afternoon, then, about three. I'll call for you here. And thanks again for your lovely lecture."

Mr. Wycherley held out a diffident hand and courteously bade her goodbye. As she drove slowly home, Denise felt she had handled a difficult situation fairly well. At least, she'd made no mistakes. But what a very odd little man!

He looked odder still as he wandered out to the waiting Renault at five minutes past three the following afternoon. He was wearing a very new pair of silver-grey flannel trousers, an old brown sports jacket which flapped loosely round his narrow chest, an open-necked shirt and a white panama hat with a broad brim. He *had* brought his butterfly net.

He raised his panama high in the air when he spotted Denise and bore down upon her with a cordial smile. He seemed in the best of spirits. "Wonderful day," he said. "This *is* nice of you, my dear young lady. You know, I was afraid I was going to keep you waiting. I was just coming through the hall when I ran into Lady Dodsworthy. Do you know her? I didn't know her until yesterday. She invited me to a fancy dress ball, of all things. Do I look like a person who'd be any use at a fancy dress ball? Ridiculous creatures!"

Denise raised her eyebrows. "You poor man! Are you pursued all the time by designing women?"

"Oh, not at all, not at all. I—er—I'm afraid I avoid them. But I must say that during my short stay in Nice I haven't formed a very high opinion of my countrywomen. They always seem to be giving parties. Of course, present company . . ."

"Oh, that's all right—I'm half Norwegian. You can say what you like."

"Really—now that's interesting. Those high cheekbones—typically Scandinavian—I might have suspected it." He held tightly on to his hat as they rounded a breezy corner. "How splendidly you drive."

"I'm afraid," said Denise, "I have very little else to do. I'm a very lazy person, you know. I just live here in the sun and swim and read. I like work, really, but I had to give up my job in London because I fell ill. It was lucky Daddy left me a little money."

"What sort of work did you do?" asked Mr. Wycherley.

"I was a model," said Denise demurely.

"A model?" Mr. Wycherley sounded shocked. "You don't mean one of those young ladies who have their portraits painted in—h'm—a minimum of clothing?"

Denise laughed, so that the car swerved dangerously. "No, no—a mannequin. I assure you I wore the maximum of clothing."

"Ah!" Mr. Wycherley seemed relieved. "I fear I know very little about clothes. My housekeeper is always complaining. She says I scatter my clothes about. I'm afraid I do, too."

Denise swung the car down a short drive and pulled up outside the house. Annette was waiting at the door, pretty as a cherry pie. Mr. Wycherley glanced appreciatively round, at the picturesque profusion of flowers, the green shutters and white walls of 'Lavandou' and the little path running down to the beach. "What a beautiful spot," he said. "And such an attractive name. Do you like lavender? I have a lot round my house, but I always think it looks so depressing when it begins to fade."

They started to wander down the path. "Whereabouts in England do you live?" asked Denise, eager to keep the conversation on a personal basis.

"Near Okecombe. Do you know it? On the edge of Dartmoor in Devon."

"I must have motored through it, I think," said Denise, cautiously, "but I don't remember very much about it."

"It's a very small country town, with fine scenery—really wild and bleak. I don't suppose you would like it if you're fond of the Riviera."

"I'm sure I should—remember I was born at Tromsø. Norway's very wild. I think it's in my blood. But what do you do all alone on Dartmoor?"

"Well, I have my collection there, and my books, and I go for long tramps on the moors—I think I know every inch of them. They're very rich in bird and insect life, and then I love the solitude. From time to time I go up to London to attend meetings of the Society—I'm a Fellow, you see—and then, of course, I travel quite a bit. Little expeditions, you know. I led a small party in Brazil the winter before last. At least, when I say led, I mean I organized it and put up some of the money. We got some first-rate specimens there."

They had reached the beach and Denise led the way to a sheltered corner by a rocky pool where the water was blue as sapphire. Annette had spread rugs on the white sand and cushions for heads. They settled themselves comfortably in the sun.

"You sound as though you have a most satisfying sort of life," said Denise, anxious that the subject should not drop. "I approve."

Mr. Wycherley looked at her gratefully. "Do you? Well, that's strange. Most people think I'm a little queer. You should hear my two brothers on the subject. But then they're hard-headed business men—they haven't any use for butterflies. They're convinced I'm wasting my life. Dear me, I really do seem to be talking a terrible lot about myself. It's most unusual, I assure you."

"Perhaps that's why you're doing it," said Denise, "making the most of a sympathetic audience. Tell me, how did you come to pick on butterflies?"

Mr. Wycherley looked a bit sheepish. "It sounds very silly," he said. "You see, my father was a manufacturer of insecticide. I suppose somebody's got to do it, and he did it. I believe it was very good insecticide—still is. He built up quite a business. When the war came, there was a very big demand for the stuff. The Government ordered a lot. The business grew and grew and my father wanted my two brothers and me to go into it and make it bigger still."

"I expect most fathers are like that. Do go on, it's most interesting."

"Not really. Well, I just didn't like the idea. I was rather stubborn, I'm afraid, and insisted on studying natural history at Cambridge. I took after my mother—she wrote one or two very scholarly books about flowers. Of course, my brothers always teased me—they said



I really *loved* insects and was trying to undo some of the harm my father had done! Just a joke, of course. So when my father died I let my brothers have my share of the business and went my own way."

"And you've been happy ever since. What a sensible man! Ah, look, here's tea."

Annette had brought a tea-basket down from the house and she spread the things out on a white table-cloth, which they weighted at the corners with stones. For the next ten or fifteen minutes Mr. Wycherley ate shrimp and cucumber sandwiches with relish, occasionally throwing a crumb of bread into the pool and watching schools of little fish devour it.

"Reminds me of a river I swam in in South America," he said. "I didn't know, but there were man-eating fish—hundreds and hundreds of them, all quite tiny. I was lucky to get out alive. I've never felt quite the same about swimming since then."

"I envy you your travels," said Denise. "But I'd never have been any good at exploring. My father was an explorer—he died when I was three, but my mother used to tell me of some of the dreadful times he used to have up in the Arctic. I've come to the conclusion I'm a stay-at-home girl. I like the simple pleasures—fussing around the house and gardening and . . ."—a dreamy look came into her lovely grey-green eyes—"oh, you know. . . ."

"And why not?" asked Mr. Wycherley. "That seems quite natural to me. But then, they always tell me I have old-fashioned ideas."

"I should have been married last year," said Denise, dreamier and dreamier, "but my—my fiancé was killed. He was climbing in the Alps. It was after that that I got ill. I came away here, really, to try and forget. But now I'm talking about *myself* and you can't possibly be interested in my worries. . . . Do have some more tea!"

"Dear me!" Mr. Wycherley looked really concerned. "That really was shocking bad luck. I *am* sorry." And he looked it. "But there, you're young and—well, very lovely—and you're sure to meet someone else."

Denise smiled bravely. "I hope so. I've always wanted a home, and a little boy. . . . Heavens, this is dreadful. Mr. Wycherley, why don't you stop me? Letting me meander on in this maudlin way. Come on, let's go and look for butterflies."

She gave him her hand and pulled him up. They prowled round the rock pools and Mr. Wycherley delivered a short lecture about various sorts of lichen. They threw little stones at a big stone to see who could hit it first. Denise even persuaded him to take off his shoes and socks and paddle. He was most amenable and seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself.

Finally, it was Denise who had to suggest a move. "I don't want to hurry you," she said—"I'd love you to stay for dinner—but I did hear you say you had a cocktail party or something and it's nearly six o'clock."

"Is it really? There, my watch has stopped again—watches always go wrong on me. I expect I forget to wind them. Well, this has been so lovely. I *have* enjoyed it. Thank you so much."

"I've enjoyed it too," said Denise a little wistfully. "It's nice to have someone to talk to—sensibly." She waited. She had done all she could—it was his move next.

She ran him back to his hotel. He didn't talk much on the way. As he stood with his hand on the door of the car he suddenly said "May I ring you up to-morrow? It would be so nice if we could meet again before I go back to England."

"Of course," said Denise. "Do you know my number? I'll write it down."

"Yes, do," said Mr. Wycherley gratefully. "I have such a dreadful memory." He clutched the little bit of paper firmly in his hand and stood waving his large panama hat as she drove away.

. . . . .

That night Denise lay awake for a long time, considering the progress she had achieved. There was no doubt in her mind that she had made an impression upon him, and a good one. She saw him as a rather lonely person who warmed to sympathy and understanding, and she had provided it. He was, she decided, by no means an insignificant person; underneath his rather vague kindness he seemed to know what he wanted. She had no illusion that he would be clay in her hands, but he seemed to appreciate being made a fuss of. His diffidence was the great obstacle, and this she must overcome.

During the next few days, she devoted herself to that task. Mr. Wycherley rang her up early in the morning after their *tête-à-tête* on the beach and that day she lunched with him in Nice. The following afternoon, at her suggestion, she ran him up to have a look at La Turbie and he spent a fascinating hour or two prowling about among the ruins there. Then there was a gap of one day when they didn't meet because Mr. Wycherley had to fulfil his other social engagements and on the last day of the Conference they motored across the Italian frontier into Ventimiglia to dine and have a bottle of *chianti* on its native soil.

By now they'd begun to feel quite like old friends, and Denise had greatly added to her knowledge of Mr. Wycherley's life and habits. She had discovered, by remarks calculated to lead in the right direction, that he was forty years old, that he had written two books on butterflies which had won him some repute, that he had backed the expedition to Brazil to the tune of £10,000 (which seemed a good sign, even though it *was* a wicked waste of money!), that he suffered from occasional attacks of malaria, and that he was a little afraid of his house-keeper, Mrs. Adams. She also learned that he ate and drank sparingly (by observation); that he was careful and conservative in his judgements; and that he wore bedsocks in winter.

During their visit to La Turbie, Denise had begun to call him 'Henry' without incurring any obvious disapproval. He had dropped

'Miss Waters', but so-far had not brought himself to substitute 'Denise'.

When the Conference was about to end, Denise said with a sigh that it was a pity he planned to leave so soon for England—she would really miss him very much. Couldn't he possibly stay on a few days longer? He thought it over, and decided that he could very well spare another week away from home. Now that the Conference was over, they saw each other for the greater part of every day.

Naturally, by this time Mr. Wycherley had been doing some serious thinking about Denise. He had had little experience of women in the past—he had been too undersized and studious to have much attraction for them, and those few who had thought it worth while to spend time on him had been singularly unappealing. In short, Mr. Wycherley had had no love life of any sort. With the possible exception of his capture of 'Ophideres Imperator', his meeting with Denise had been easily the most exciting thing that had ever happened to him. He was fascinated by her beauty and gracefulness and felt that he would be quite happy simply sitting and watching her for hours on end. He appreciated her kindness to him; he liked the way she mothered him; he was flattered and pleased by the evident interest she took in him. He studied the situation with the detached impartiality of a man to whom facts have always been important and he decided that he must be in love with her and would certainly like to marry her and take her off to be the mistress of his home in Devonshire. This was the point he had reached when he decided to prolong his stay on the Riviera.

She would, he believed, make an admirable wife. She appeared to have a contented disposition; her interests, by all appearances, were commendably domestic; she liked and wanted children; she was fond of the simple pleasures of the country and she was always ready to listen intelligently when he talked about his work. He imagined her tending the flower beds around his Dartmour house; he imagined her gracing his table when, occasionally, some fellow lepidopterist would run down to spend a weekend with them in Devon; he imagined her walking with him in the Devon lanes, picking primroses. However he imagined her, the picture was pleasing.

What he couldn't understand, being a very modest man, was why she appeared to like him so much. He knew that he was physically insignificant—he had been obliged to accept that fact with fortitude many years ago. Such other qualities as he had were far from spectacular. Perhaps she had discovered in his gentle companionship an assuagement of her sorrow in losing her fiancé. Even so, he found it very difficult to believe that she would agree to marry him—and yet she seemed very disinclined to let him go away. It was all very odd. Disarmed by her air of independence and the fact that she was living in comfort on what appeared to be a substantial private income, it never occurred to him for a moment that she might want to marry him for his money.

Having considered the matter in all its aspects, he decided, on what was to be his last evening at 'Lavandou,' that he must put his fate to the test. He was horribly nervous, and fidgeted with his coffee spoon even more than usual as they sat on the verandah after dinner looking out over the darkening sea. He was sensitive enough to feel a certain electricity in the atmosphere. He didn't know that this was Denise reacting to the prospect of wealth as a diviner's rod reacts to the promise of water.

Timid though he was, he kept his dignity. He said very simply "Denise . . ."—and this was the first time he had used her name—"Denise, I shall feel very lonely, I'm afraid, without your companionship."

"I shall feel lonely too, when you're gone," said Denise softly.

This, at any rate, was encouraging.

"I have become very fond of you," Mr. Wycherley went on steadily, "even though we haven't known each other for very long. I—er—I fear I've fallen in love with you. Perhaps I oughtn't to have done, because I—well, I'm not exactly a young man any more, and you—you're hardly more than a girl. Also, I know that you still remember your—your loss. But I did just want to tell you, before I go home, that I should very much like to marry you. I can't make the—the suggestion—sound very attractive. You know what I'm like—just a rather dry old butterfly-collector. But I can give you a comfortable home and perhaps—well, the sort of little luxuries you've been used to."

Denise, smiling with satisfaction in the darkness, felt like saying "Of course I'll marry you, you silly little man. Let's go and do it right away." Instead, she said: "Henry, you're a dear—but this is a bit unexpected. I've enjoyed being with you terribly, but—well, I suppose I hadn't thought about it much—we were just good friends and I never thought you were feeling that way about it. I—oh, Henry, I'm very proud that you asked me. Can I think about it tonight? It's such a serious thing, marriage—Stay one more day, and I'll tell you to-morrow. . . ." She covered his hand with hers in a warm friendly gesture.

"Of course, my dear!—I think you're quite right not to rush. I'm a happy man because you haven't said "No" right away."

"You're too good for me," said Denise, and this was about the only true thing she had said for ten days. "To-morrow evening, then—I'll expect you for dinner."

. . . . .

All next day she lounged on the beach, sunning herself and swimming and making plans. She decided that they would have to be married in a registry office—otherwise there would be difficulties about bridesmaids and her total lack of relations. She could explain that she wanted it to be quiet out of respect for her late fiancé. They could travel back to England together and be married by special licence. In a very few days she would be Mrs. Henry Wycherley and

his fortune would be hers. She couldn't very well mention money until they were safely married, but afterwards she would arrange their financial affairs to her satisfaction. She would try to make him a good wife, as long as he treated her generously—well, not good, perhaps, but at least very discreet. Pity he was so keen on having a son, since she wasn't capable of giving him one, but she would probably be able to persuade him it was his fault.

Directly she saw Henry that evening she knew that she could safely set his mind at rest without appearing unmaidenly—he was concerned only with her answer. She put on a very good act. She took his hand in hers and walked with him down to the beach, and while they were standing looking out over the sea again she said: "I've thought about it, Henry. I will marry you."

"Darling," he said.

"I've been thinking about what it would be like after you'd gone. I hadn't realized how much you meant to me. Of course, Henry dear—I must be honest with you, you'd sooner have it that way, I'm sure—I don't think I can ever be in love again as I was with poor Richard. I don't believe people ever love twice in quite the same way—do you? But I know he'd have wanted me to be happy, and I'm sure I'll be happy with you. You're so kind and understanding and—clever. I think it's so important that a man should be clever—so that his wife can look up to him, I really will try and make you a good wife, Henry. Kiss me!"

She bent down a little, and he kissed her, awkwardly. He was deeply moved. Denise felt no repulsion, nothing physical at all. She was elated. Now she had the situation completely under control. Now he was hers—he, and his!

She wanted to start talking about all sorts of plans, but she knew she mustn't—yet. This was Henry's evening. He must be allowed to stutter and stumble and murmur the sweet nothings which from someone else might have been rather exciting. He must be allowed, indeed encouraged, to caress her. It was a bit trying, but happily he hadn't a very passionate nature and would soon get accustomed to her and settle down into a devoted and unexacting husband.

"I haven't been so happy for ages and ages," she told him softly, gently stroking his hair. "Just to think—it's only about ten days ago that we met, and now we're going to be married. I'm sure I've been disgracefully unwomanly. Are you positive you don't think me a hussy?"

"A hussy! Good gracious, no—certainly not," Henry was quite indignant. "I think you're very, very sweet, my dear, and if you made me think that you liked me, that was a very proper thing to do, because it helped me out a great deal. If you'd been one of those very reserved girls, I doubt if I'd ever have dared to come to the point. I'm so glad it's all over. And just to think—in a very little while we shall be at home together—*our* home—on Dartmoor."

"I know," said Denise. "It's marvellous."

Actually, she wasn't at all sure she was going to like Dartmoor.

## CHAPTER 5

FROM the time of Denise's marriage to Henry in the winter of 1936 until the end of World War II nine years later, very little happened to her which is worth recording in detail.

Henry's house, named 'Green Boughs' by a former owner, proved to be a solidly built Georgian place just on the southern outskirts of Okecombe. It was set pleasantly among trees in about three acres of garden and lawn and it commanded a lovely view straight over an apparently limitless expanse of empty purple moorland dominated by the thousand-foot crag of Yes Tor.

Of its modest four rooms down and seven up, Henry was really interested in only one—the large light top room which housed his collection and where he worked. When she first looked over the house, Denise pretended to be fascinated by the contents of this room. She patiently followed Henry around while he showed her case after case of butterflies and moths. She examined without visible boredom the charts and diagrams which covered his walls instead of pictures, and dutifully looked over his large collection of highly technical books. She inspected through his microscope the more intimate parts of 'Zeuzera Pyrina' and tried not to turn up her nose at some live grubs of 'Hepialus Humuli.' She never had liked caterpillars and was against bringing them into the house. She refrained from commenting adversely on the faint smell of chloroform that hung about the room, but she did say that the place looked very dusty and that Henry needed a new carpet. Henry said he didn't like too much dusting and was rather attached to the carpet. She decided not to interfere in any way—a decision which Henry approved—and after that she visited the room as rarely as possible.

As far as the rest of the house was concerned, Denise had a free hand and she carried out many changes. Henry's housekeeper, Mrs. Adams, departed rather regretfully a fortnight after they moved in and Denise took over control. She employed a daily cook from the town, in addition to the maid, a hard-working country girl with apple-red cheeks. She also had the whole place re-decorated and re-furnished at great expense with the advice and assistance of a leading firm of London furnishers. She hoped that later on she would be able to persuade Henry to move into a larger and newer house, and adopt a way of life more in keeping with his wealth. But for the time being, she felt it was better to act cautiously.

She was astonished to find that Henry possessed no car, and that the garage was filled instead with garden tools, butterfly nets and junk. He said that he had never really felt the need of a car—he had an old bicycle which he enjoyed riding around the district and there was always a taxi available in the town if he wanted luggage taken to the station or visitors brought up to the house. However, he agreed at once that now he had a wife the situation had quite changed and he accompanied her to a showroom in Exeter where they bought a smart

little Lanchester. The gardener, Jan, was instructed to build a small shed for the garden tools.

Denise made a good impression on the few neighbours with whom Henry was acquainted. They dined with the Squire, Sir Oliver Carr; and Lady Carr afterwards confided to Henry that she thought his wife was 'quite lovely.' Dr. Parsons, a bluff and busy Scot, also seemed to approve. They exchanged visits with Colonel Fletcher, the Chief Constable, and were called upon by the Vicar, the Rev. James Featherleigh. Henry's two brothers, on different occasions, found time to run down from the Midlands to have a look at the bride and, exchanging notes afterwards, agreed that Henry was a 'lucky dog.' Very soon Denise was fully accepted both by Henry's relatives and by local Okecombe society. Social obligations bored her, but she wanted to appear in a good light in Henry's eyes so she did all the things that were expected of her by the local people. She went to church to please the Vicar, joined the Conservative Association to please Lady Carr, subscribed generously to the Cottage Hospital and other charities and in general behaved herself impeccably. She never became popular among the ladies of the parish—she was not sufficiently interested in them and their affairs for that—but no one had a bad word to say about her.

Determined to play her part as a good wife, she looked after Henry with diligence if not with devotion. She saw to it that he was well-fed and well-clothed; she watched over his health; she listened politely when he talked about his work, and kept up an amiable chatter when he seemed to want entertaining.

In one or two perhaps small respects, she seemed rather different from what Henry had expected. He soon realized, for instance, that she had exaggerated her passion for a quiet home life. She never sewed, or cooked, or did anything at all around the house that she could get anyone else to do for her. She much preferred to read magazines, or play the gramophone, or take the car down into Exeter for an afternoon's shopping or an evening at the cinema.

Nor did she turn out to be the enthusiastic gardener that she had pretended to be. She hardly gave the garden a glance until the spring, and then her gardening never got beyond the stage of a few ineffective jabs with a trowel. She enjoyed picking the flowers that Jan the gardener grew, and that was about all.

Rather more disturbing was the fact that she appeared to have none of that love for the country which her conversation on the Riviera had led Henry to expect. She was always quite happy to take him for a run in the car in fine sunny weather down to the coast, perhaps, or round the lovely primrose-yellow Devon lanes or across into Cornwall with a well-filled picnic basket. But nothing attracted her which required effort. Henry's delight in the wildness of the moors, the great silence of the tors, the brackish fast-running streams ten miles from the main road, found no response in her. Only once did he succeed in persuading her to go walking with him for a whole day on Dartmoor, and then she complained about the rough ground

and floundered among the peat bogs and became extremely cross in spite of her good resolutions and he decided it was better not to ask her again. He went on taking his walks, but he took them alone.

Henry was puzzled by Denise's failure to live up to her description of herself, but he took his small discoveries very well. He was sorry, but not annoyed. She was attentive and she was lovely, and she was always ready to fall in with any suggestion which didn't involve her in physical activity, and in general she tried to please him. In short, she seemed to him at this stage about as good a wife as it was reasonable for anyone to expect. He was still rather under her spell.

Denise also made some discoveries. One of the first things she found out was that it was going to be far more difficult for her to control Henry's fortune than she had imagined. Henry attached very little importance to material things as far as he personally was concerned—you could tell that from his small house and his shabby old clothes and his indifference to what he ate—but it seemed that some of his father's blood must be running thinly in his veins after all, for he kept a shrewd eye on his bank account. Denise discovered that he actually had a broker with whom he dined occasionally when he happened to be in town, just to make sure that his investments were in order.

The fact was that most of Henry was malleable, but he had an obstinate streak. He was quite content that in most respects Denise should rule his life—that, after all, was what he had expected when he married her. He didn't in the least mind her being the dominating personality in all trivial and domestic things. But he wasn't going to allow himself to be in any way deflected from his essential pursuits—his work—and he wasn't going to have her bothering her head about money. He was old-fashioned enough to believe that the man should hold the purse-strings. When Denise sometimes accused him of having financial secrets or—after he had seen his broker—of being a 'money-grubber'—all, of course, in a pleasantly teasing way—he would reply with a twinkle in his eye that money was far too valuable a commodity to waste and that he had all sorts of plans for the future. She was dismayed to learn that one of these plans was something to do with what he called 'founding a chair in natural history' at some university—a project which would apparently make a deep hole in his fortune. It was just like Henry to go wasting his wealth on that sort of thing!

She was reassured, however, when he told her with an affectionate smile that there'd be plenty left for her. She was more pleased still when, just before their first wedding anniversary, he told her that he'd made a new will and that after certain bequests to do mainly with his work, the bulk of his fortune would come to her if anything happened to him. He gave her this piece of news quite casually, as though it were of no particular significance, and indeed to him it was simply a matter of proper domestic routine for a conscientious married man. She was his wife, and it was his duty to see that she was adequately provided for in all contingencies.



Denise was gratified to know that if Henry died she would come into sole control of his money. That, unfortunately, didn't give her control of it now. But in the meantime she certainly hadn't any reason to complain about his day-to-day generosity. He never raised any questions about the household accounts, which were considerable. He gave her a lavish allowance which permitted her to dress according to her tastes and left a comfortable margin for other luxuries.

This was the position at the end of the first year of their marriage.

. . . . .

Little by little, Denise began to feel increasingly frustrated. Somehow, her plans hadn't worked out properly. She was not living at all the sort of life she wanted to lead. She had succeeded in marrying a rich man, but she didn't want to be tied to him by his wealth. She wanted freedom; she wanted the glitter and lights of London; she wanted city luxury and warmth and frivolity; she wanted restaurants and dances and lovers. She was only twenty-three, and compared with her, Henry was just an old stick. She hated the country—the dark, raw, muddy, uncouth country—and above all she hated the bleak desolation of Dartmoor. When it came to a view, she would have preferred a neon sign to Yes Tor.

Henry began to get on her nerves with his pottering about the moors, his apathetic attitude to the ordinary excitements of life and his ridiculous interest in beetles. She felt horribly tied to him. It was all very well to have a big allowance and be heiress to a fortune, but she now knew that she had bought these things only by an appalling sacrifice of independence. She had to be so careful. If she followed her inclinations and took a lover, Henry might find out and then he would probably divorce her and that would be the end of the fortune. She daren't even quarrel with him seriously, though she often felt like it, for fear that she might be quarrelling with his money. The simple fact was that she wanted his money without him. She would have liked to take it all and go off on her own and live her own life again as an independent woman.

In these circumstances, it was inevitable that her relations with Henry should steadily deteriorate. At all costs, she had to make a change. She began to complain that the hard Dartmoor country didn't agree with her; that it made her feel moody and ill. Henry was concerned and worried. She threw out hints that it would be much more fun if they gave up 'Green Boughs' and went to live in London. The hints became suggestions, and the suggestions developed into well-organized 'scenes.'

Now Henry was a kind and reasonable man, and not a stupid one. He had no intention of leaving Dartmoor himself, except for short periods. He disliked towns as much as Denise disliked the country, and Dartmoor suited his work as well as his inclinations. If she had suggested a different part of the country, he might have agreed, but she wanted them to take a flat in the heart of London. On the other hand, he saw that she really was getting miserable in Devonshire and

that she was essentially a town-dweller. He faced the fact philosophically. Under pressure, he finally agreed that they should rent a small but comfortable service flat in Kensington in addition to the Dartmoor house and that they should run up to town now and again for two or three days at a time.

For a while this worked. They divided their time between Dartmoor and London. When they were in town, they usually 'did' a theatre or two and dined out and Denise went shopping. She became much more cheerful, and that seemed to justify the experiment. It was a pity, said Denise, that Henry didn't dance. Sometimes he left her to amuse herself while he spent an evening with one or other of his cronies from the learned Society of which he was a member.

Having carefully inserted the thin end of the wedge, Denise now proceeded cautiously to drive it home. Little by little, over a period of several years, the centre of gravity of her life switched from country to town. When Henry went off to attend a conference or give a lecture, as he quite often did, it seemed only natural that Denise should stay alone at the flat. Finally—at Henry's suggestion—she began to go up to London alone. It was all very respectable, of course—the first time she went to spend a few days at the flat with Henry's sister-in-law who came down from the Midlands, and the next time she spent a few days there without Henry's sister-in-law. Little by little, she acquired a circle of friends in London, both male and female. Henry was rewarded by her increased contentment and display of affection. He missed her a good deal when she was away, but she rarely stayed more than a night or two at a time and she was always touchingly grateful when she came back. He trusted her implicitly but mistakenly. During the years immediately preceding the war, she attached to herself at different periods not one but several lovers, and enjoyed herself immensely. She was always very careful, and to anyone who knew her as little as Henry really knew her, there were no grounds for suspicion. He was too engrossed in his work to be a jealous husband. On the whole he was by no means unhappy with Denise. His one bitter regret was that she had had no children. He suggested timidly that she should try to do 'something about it,' but—thinking better of her plan to put the blame on him—which might lead to investigations—she said that after all she was only in her early twenties and there was still lots of time for something to happen. Unconvinced, he still continued to hope.

In 1937 Denise became more daring in her conduct. Early in the year Henry explained to her with many regrets and apologies that he felt he must accept an invitation to join an expedition to Panama which would keep him away for three or four months. He suggested that Denise might care to go with him to America and look around there while he was on his trip, but she had other plans. They shut up the Dartmoor house and she went to live at the flat. No sooner was Henry safely out of the way than she went off to Paris with a poor but passionate young artist and had six wonderful weeks of riotous

pleasure. She felt her old self again—young and gay and attractive to men and full of vigour—and she thought all the time what a pity it was that Henry would come back. If only he'd get bitten by a snake or something, it would solve all her problems.

. . . . .

Soon after that the war started and put an end to all her fun. She regarded it as a personal disaster. After Dunkirk she would have liked to escape to America, but she was frightened to make the sea voyage. During the first year, she continued to journey up to London but when the bombing began she discovered that the country had advantages after all. She was terrified of air raids, and after she'd been caught in one quite minor 'blitz' during a night spent in the flat of an American staff officer she decided she had no more use for London until the end of the war. So she stayed down in Devon—bored, miserable and increasingly unpopular as it became evident that she had no desire to perform any sort of service. Almost all the things she most enjoyed doing in the world were now beyond her reach. The clothes ration was ridiculously inadequate; travel was impossible; food was drab and she could get no petrol for her car. She was almost entirely deprived of the company of men, for though she occasionally met a handsome young officer in Okecombe, she couldn't risk an affair. Her cook left, and her maid was called up and presently she had to work in her own house just as though she had never married a rich man.

Worse still, the shadow of the call-up crept steadily nearer to her, for she was young, able-bodied and childless and she was doing nothing useful. If only she could have had a child now, she would have done so, for that would have saved her. She became more and more afraid that she would be conscripted into one of the Services, perhaps a dangerous one, or that she would be sent to work in a munitions factory, where there might be a horrible explosion. In the end, she offered her services to the Okecombe Cottage Hospital, which was desperately short of nurses, and in the menial tasks she was at first given to do there she found both security and relief from the unbearable tedium of doing nothing at a time when everyone else was so busy.

She never got on very well at the Hospital—she couldn't forget that she was the wife of a wealthy man, and the Matron didn't like her. Nor did her fellow probationers. But she was intelligent, she learned quickly, and the male patients thought she was lovely.

Henry, in the meantime, had quietly gone on with his work. He was such a poor physical specimen that none of the Services wanted him, and such specialised knowledge as he had couldn't be given any twist to make it serve war purposes. He insisted, however—to Denise's amusement—in joining the Home Guard when it was formed. He looked quite absurd in uniform but he didn't seem to mind and he stood up well to the severity of guard duty on the moors. Altogether, in a rather pathetic way he tried to do his best.

During the war years his attitude to Denise had changed. After eight years of marriage he knew that she was a shallow selfish woman. Her idleness during the early stages of the war had shocked him. He had realized by now that they had virtually nothing in common and that she had no real affection for him. He felt that she had married him on false pretences. He had given up hope that she would have any children. As far as his marriage was concerned, he had to confess to himself that he was a disappointed man.

On the other hand he had plenty of other things to interest him and if his domestic life was dull and lacked warmth and vitality, at least there was surprisingly little friction. He was courteous and considerate to Denise because it was his nature, and as long as he left her alone she was not usually bad-tempered and sometimes was amusing. He was nearly fifty, and becoming set in his ways. He had taken Denise for better or worse, and there was nothing he could do about it now. And he still thought she was beautiful to look at.

That was roughly the position at 'Green Boughs' when the war came to an end, and the events were set in train which carried Denise's life swiftly forward to its fatal conclusion.

## CHAPTER 6

A MONTH or two before the war ended, a Lancaster bomber came flying back to England in a badly-damaged condition after a night raid on Magdeburg. It had been hit repeatedly by flak, and a good deal of it was shot away, including some of its navigating instruments. Two of its crew were dead, and others wounded. Its pilot, Squadron-Leader Charles Trant, D.F.C. and bar, nursed the aircraft back across what he hoped was some part of the south coast of England and then, as a landing was impossible, he ordered his crew to bale out. He jumped last, and came to earth on the edge of the moors about a mile from Okecombe. He couldn't walk, for the calf of his right leg had been ripped open by a shell splinter. He was found an hour or two later, carried on a hurdle to the nearest road by a couple of labourers, and from there removed in the County Ambulance to Okecombe Cottage Hospital. His wound was dressed, he slept for twelve hours, and the first thing he saw when he woke up was Denise.

"How does your leg feel now?" she asked, with a smile which almost healed it.

"It could be a lot worse," said Trant. "Is that tea you've got there, nurse?"

Denise nodded, and eased him up so that he could lean on his elbow.

"Fine," he said. "I can take a lot of it." He drank two cups, gazing appreciatively at Denise between gulps. Considering that he had spent a gruelling night and had narrowly escaped death only a

few hours before, she considered that his glance was pretty fresh. What she thought didn't deter him. He looked her up and down with a trained eye and as she took his tea-cup he stroked her arm.

"I seem to have chosen a good hospital," he said. He ate a little food, and went to sleep again.

. . . . .

From the very beginning Denise was attracted to her new patient. He was easily the most striking male who had been through the ward since she had started working there. He had jet-black hair, steely blue eyes under black brows, a wide mouth with lips slightly on the thin side, and a square cleft chin. His face was taut and sunburned. Judging by the amount of space he took in the bed, he was tall; and his arms and shoulders were muscular. To Denise he looked more masculine and formidable than any man she could remember meeting. The records showed him to be thirty-three—three years older than herself.

Denise was starved for men and she decided that this one had dropped from the sky specially for her. He would be in the hospital at least a couple of months with that leg, and since she was the only nurse with the slightest pretensions to good looks there would be no competition. She would do as she liked with him.

After the first day or two, however, she realized that there was no need for her to do anything. This was a case of desire at first sight for both of them. Trant proved to be outspoken, self-possessed and sophisticated. He knew what he wanted as well as she did. He seemed to have taken her measure from the first glance and appropriated her without effort. His bold hard eyes followed her round admiringly as she carried out her duties in the ward and she was always conscious of his presence.

On the evening of the second day, as she was hovering around his bed, he suddenly said: "Do you live near here?"

"About a mile away."

"Married, Denise?"

"Aha!"

"Who's the lucky man?"

"Well, if you must know, his name's Henry Wycherley. He's a—  
a lepidopterist."

"A what?"

"A lepidopterist. He collects butterflies."

"Good God, what a hobby! Anyway, he's collected *one* beauty. You're the loveliest creature I've seen in years. You don't mind my saying so, do you?"

"Would it make any difference if I did?"

"Not the slightest. Are you in love with your husband?"

Denise regarded him with a coolness which she did not feel. "You've got a herve, haven't you?"

"Naturally. That's how I got the D.F.C. You might just as well tell me, you know. I shall find out anyway."

"Well, I'm not in love with him. He's about fifty and most unattractive."

"Then why did you marry him?"

"That's my business."

"Is he rich?"

Denise smiled. "He's able to support me."

"Ah, that explains everything. I must say I admire your frankness."

"Frankness! I like that, when you keep on dragging things out of me. I think you're the most impudent man I've ever met."

"I'm sure you've met plenty. You look like a woman who's had a lot of lovers!"

"How dare you," said Denise, and marched off. But it was only part of the game. She knew he was trying to see how far he could go; she knew he would go much farther if she didn't stop him; and she knew she didn't want to stop him. Half an hour later she was smiling and talking to him again.

"It's no good your putting on an act with me," he said. "We understand each other. When I'm better, we'll have fun."

"We can't have fun round here," said Denise. "I'm too well known."

"That's all right," he said confidently. "We'll fix it. I haven't had any fun for a long time. You've got a lovely body."

She shivered. "Don't. Why do you say things like that?"

"To see what effect it has, of course. Don't pretend you don't like it."

"You're very sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Of course."

"Don't you ever make a mistake?"

"Not very often. If a woman lets a man take small liberties with her on the first day or two, he's on pretty safe ground. When I stroked your arm I could feel you liked it. It's the early part of a campaign that counts."

"I see—blitzkrieg. You're incredibly conceited."

"Not at all—I'm a realist. I know I'm not every woman's type. It's quite simple. If my technique doesn't give results, I stop trying. If it does, I go ahead. Don't you think that's sensible?"

"It's very cold-blooded. Don't you ever fall in love?"

"Not on your life. Only gets you into a mess. I like to control my actions."

Denise sniffed. "I shouldn't think any woman would be interested on those terms."

"No? You'd be surprised. They all think they can work the miracle."

"I think you're intolerable!"

"I know you do. Have you any children?"

"No."

"Neither have I. Nor a wife. I'm a free man—free to do anything I like, if I can find anything worth doing."

"Won't you be able to fly again?"

"Doctor says 'No'—not in this war, anyway. I'll probably be over-age for the next."

"Are you glad you can't fight any more?"

He shrugged. "It kept one's mind off things. Nothing to worry about except carrying out instructions. It'll seem a bit tame sitting around at home after spending the best years of my life bombing other people's cities to hell."

"What'll you do? What was your job before the war?"

"Oh, it was very dull. I was an accountant in London—my father had a business. I was glad to chuck it."

"And you won't go back to it?"

"No fear. I don't know what I'll do. Don't care much. I'll make love to you, Denise."

"Haven't you any morals at all?"

"I don't think so. I find they hamper one. Pity you and I can't knock around the world together, hitting the high spots. That's what I feel like doing—having a jolly good time. I certainly don't want to work."

"You sound very fed up."

"Oh, I'm browned off, all right."

During the next few weeks Denise had many long talks with Trant. As his leg healed, he began to chafe at inactivity, complained of boredom, and monopolised her leisure time. When she was with him, he was hard, penetrating and cynical. When left to himself he often sank into deep fits of moroseness. Sometimes, she asked him what he was thinking about as he lay with his hands behind his head, his features motionless.

"I'm thinking about the future," he said one day, in reply to her question.

"And what do you see there?"

"Nothing—except you. Absolutely nothing. Complete and utter blankness. I think I've had it!"

"Had what?"

"Everything. Life. It's going to be dull. I like excitement. I'll never settle down."

All the same his spirits rose when he could get up and sit with her on the terrace of the hospital in the warm spring sun. He found the view stimulating.

"I like these moors," he said. "If my leg gets quite right, I'd like to explore them. Fine colours, no people, nice and primitive. Are you any good at walking?"

"No. I detest the moors. They're squelchy."

"You'd like them with me. In a month it'll be dry on the hillside. We could get away from people there. Find a quiet spot up by one of those tors and make love. Do you hear, make love? Violently. I want you."

"I want you too. But if you think we can just walk off together for a day on the moors, you're mistaken. What about my husband?"

"Get a divorce."

"You forget he can afford to keep me."

"Ah, yes. Well, you'd better introduce me to him. I'll become a friend of the family. If I admire his butterflies, perhaps he'll trust me with his wife. Wonderful platonic friendship!"

"I've been thinking," said Denise. "Why don't you stay round here for a bit? It's wonderful air for convalescents. You could build up your strength."

"If I build up my strength any more, I shall rape you in the ward."

"You're incorrigible. Seriously, though, there's a little cottage to let on the edge of the town, up on a hill. 'Rosemary Cottage'. It's quite cheap—only a few shillings a week. You could get some furniture up from Exeter."

"We'd only need a bed!"

"Be sensible. I mean it. It's nice and isolated—a hundred yards from the next cottage, with trees in between, and on the other side of it a lane running down into the main road and on to the moors. I could come there sometimes."

"What about hubby?"

"Oh, I could pretend I was at the pictures. I've got some petrol now—I could park the car among the bushes at the bottom of the lane, and walk up. After dark—I could leave the pictures early."

"My sweet Denise, you have the instincts of a born conspirator. I believe you're almost as hardened as I am. But wouldn't it be easier and safer for me to go back to town, and you to come up there?"

"In a way—but I'm worried about Henry. You see, he's willed all his money to me, but I'm afraid he may change his mind. I don't want to give him any excuse. I want to be near him—to watch him. He's got some plan for squandering his fortune on a university."

"Damned inconsiderate. How much money has he got, anyway?"

"Oh, about a quarter of a million pounds."

"What?" Trant shot up in his chair. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. He inherited it."

"Good God! I thought when you talked about his money you meant he had a paltry few thousand. I say, this is interesting."

"It would be if the money were mine. We could go round the world together. But it isn't."

"Maybe he'll die soon."

"He's only fifty and very fit. You should see him on the moors—he's as sprightly as a Boy Scout. He walks twenty miles in a day and hardly notices it."

"Perhaps he'll fall off a tor and break his neck. A quarter of a million! God, that would almost make life worth living again. I say, you certainly did work things well for yourself."

"I don't quite like the way you put it. He fell in love with me."

"The poor sap. Immoral too. Buying the love of a pure woman."



"Charles, I do dislike your tone. You don't treat me with any respect."

"You're wrong there. I respect you very much. I've got to know you rather well in hospital. Not merely have you a wonderful body, which drives me almost crazy—you also have poise, and self-control, and confidence in yourself. You're a hard woman, but you know what you want and you've got sense enough to go all out for it. That's why I respect you. In many ways we're rather alike. How did you get that way? Tell me something about yourself. I'm sure there's something funny about your past."

"There is. I'm half Norwegian."

"No! That's fun. Where were you born?"

"Tromso. But I left there when I was four."

"Pity—it's a grand spot. I know Tromso a bit. I took part in two raids there on a German pocket-battleship."

"Oh," said Denise cautiously.

"I don't remember very much, of course—you don't have much time for sightseeing when you're bombing—but I remember being struck by that lovely little lighthouse in the fiord just opposite the town. The green stone is such an unusual colour. You must have noticed that, even if you were only four when you left."

"Of course I remember. I often used to stand and watch the gulls flying round it. I think it must be a local stone."

Trant suddenly threw back his head and laughed aloud. "Oh, Denise, you're wonderful—wonderful! What an audacious and inventive liar—but how careless. My dear, there is no lighthouse in Tromso Fiord."

Denise didn't smile, she didn't blush. She looked at Trant rather coldly. "I think that was a very mean trick," she said.

"I know—I admit it—but I always felt you couldn't be as good as you looked. I don't mind—I don't care whether you were born in Tromso or Tottenham. But if you're a complete adventuress, you might just as well tell me. I like the type. We'll get on better."

"All right," said Denise coolly. "I was born in a London slum. I got a job as a model. I had an affair with a rich man. There was—well, some unpleasantness. When we parted he gave me some money."

"Much money?"

"No. Why should I tell you all this, anyway? Enough to take me to the Riviera. I lived there for a while, and met Henry. That's all."

"A most respectable story. I'm sure your wealthy lover was glad to fork out."

"He was."

"That's what I said. I bet you didn't leave him much alternative. Denise, I congratulate you. Now, because you've been a good honest girl, I'll tell you my life story."

"It'll probably bore me."

"Oh, no, it won't. I *really* came from a nice home. I was given an expensive education. Unfortunately, I didn't like work. I liked

women. I got a bit stretched for money at college, and afterwards—in my father's office—some little bills became rather pressing. I forged a cheque—quite a big cheque. But at that time I hadn't learned to be careful, and I was found out. I spent two years in prison. It wasn't a bit nice. I don't know what I'd have done when I came out, but by a stroke of good fortune the war started. I did a bit of wangling with references and things and got a commission in the R.A.F. As you see I did very well. Practically my only virtue is that I have unlimited courage. Actually, it's fairly easy to be brave when you don't care a hoot what happens to you anyway. So here I am, with a good record, an insignificant wound, a small gratuity and dishonourable intentions. Isn't that a fascinating story?"

"Well!" said Denise.

"Now don't pretend you're shocked. If *you* never forged a cheque it was simply because your methods were different." His bold eyes swept her up and down. "You started with some initial capital. I've never seen such lovely breasts in all my life."

"Charles! Someone might hear. I think you're absolutely impossible. I've never been talked to like that."

'That's your misfortune. You'll get to like it. I wish my leg were better.'

She had still not quite digested his story. "What was it like in—in prison?" she asked.

"Revolting. No consideration, no respect, bad food, no cocktails, no fun at all. I don't recommend it."

"You seem to treat your criminal past very light-heartedly. I'm surprised you told me."

"Oh, I had to tell you to win your trust!"

She laughed. "You're amusing, and that's about all I can say for you. I don't know why I tolerate you. After all, I've not been to jail."

Charles stretched his hand out and ostentatiously touched a piece of wood. "You never know. You've got the right instincts. I don't often make mistakes with women. I know you too well, Denise. I felt certain you were phoney from the beginning. You look too deep. A scheming hussy—but so adorable!"

"I'm still not sure I like you. It would serve you right if I gave you away. Suppose I told everyone that you'd been in jail?"

He smiled. "Suppose I told your husband that you'd blackmailed one rich man in order to marry another?"

"He wouldn't believe you."

"Oh, you can't bank on that. It's amazing how quickly a tiny seed of suspicion will grow into a horrid big doubt if it's carefully nourished and planted with skill. Do I frighten you?"

"No, you don't—but I almost wish I hadn't met you. You're so utterly ruthless."

"My soft-hearted angel of mercy, of course I am. Life's like that—either *you're* ruthless or someone else is. If it made me happy to devote myself to the service of my fellow men, or if I felt that knowledge

was a sufficient reward for effort, then I could afford to be nice and kind and considerate. But I've no use for that sort of life. I want money, beautiful women, good food and wine, travel, luxury. I want to satisfy all my senses. I admit it. I can't think of anything else worth living for. Other people have different ideas—that's up to them. Those are my ideas. The world doesn't make much sense anyway, but you can still have a good time in it—if you know how."

"If that's what you think, I can't understand why you joined the R.A.F. Why didn't you try and get a cushy, comfortable job?"

"My dear girl, I enjoyed the R.A.F. I loved bombing. Maybe I have a sadistic streak. Normally you're not allowed to go and smash other people's property up and blow their bodies into ribbons. The war altered all that. I got a tremendous kick when I saw heavy bombs falling from my squadron and saw great blocks of buildings heaving up into the air in flame and smoke with all their contents. Haven't you ever wanted to throw crockery about? Bombing's far more fun."

"But you might have been killed."

"I really wouldn't have cared a damn."

"Or mutilated?"

"So what? I should still have been left with the essential choice—to live or die. That's a tremendous comfort and protection. If I'd been so badly hurt that life wasn't worth living any more, I'd have put a bullet through my head. Quite easy, quite painless, not very untidy."

"I think you're inhuman. I couldn't bear to die. I enjoy life far too much. There are still so many things I want to do."

"Me too. Very much so. You know, I think perhaps I *will* take that cottage. As you say, the fresh air here will do me good. I can hardly wait for those delicious summer evenings, when I shall lean in the dusk from my little casement window and see your white gossamer figure flitting up the lane to keep a love tryst!"

"Idiot! I shall wear a dark coat and probably blacken my face. You do realize we've got to be careful, don't you?"

"My dear girl, you don't need to tell me the value of a quarter of a million pounds. I'll be discretion itself. And I really must get to know Henry. I—er—think we shall have something in common!"

"You beast!"

"I know, I always find the *double entendre* irresistible. Yes, I'll worm my way into his confidence. You see if I don't. He'll like me."

"He won't like you a bit if you talk to him as you talk to me."

"But I shan't. I shall be modest, respectful and enquiring. He'll naturally look with favour on an officer with the D.F.C. and bar. You can explain to him what it means if he doesn't know. I shall look embarrassed and stop you and say 'Please, really . . .' I'm quite looking forward to it. We might even go for walks together on the moors—he and I. I like walking too. Damn this leg!"

"You seem to have it all planned out. But I ought to warn you you're mistaken if you think you'll get any money out of him. He's rather shrewd."

"You took him in—why shouldn't I? Anyway, you misjudge me. I promise you I won't even try to borrow a fiver. What's the good of a fiver, anyway? Denise, do you love me?"

"Certainly not. After the things you've told me about yourself, I *should* be a fool. I simply find you interesting."

"Your interest will probably ripen into love. I hope it doesn't, though. Women in love are such a bore."

Denise shook her head. "You're a most difficult person to deal with. Quite overwhelming."

And then, as though anxious not to end the conversation on a note of weakness, she added defiantly "But you needn't think you can dominate me. I shall probably tire of you first. Then you'll see that other people can be ruthless besides you."

Trant was maddening. He just smiled.

## CHAPTER 7

By the middle of May, Trant's leg was completely healed and he was ready to leave the hospital. As it was now his intention to stay in the district and to get to know it, he would very much have liked to buy a small car, but his financial resources were slender and he couldn't afford it. He thought of trying to get some money out of Denise, but decided that it was too early in their acquaintance to make the suggestion. In the end, he bought a light sporting bicycle which the Okecombe cycle shop said was 'just the thing for these hills', and he found that it served his purpose admirably.

One morning, just before he left the hospital for good, he called on Farmer Tolley who, according to Denise, had a cottage to let. Tolley said at first that he was keeping it for a new labourer he needed, but when Trant let it leak out that he was the R.A.F. officer who'd baled out on the moors some weeks earlier the farmer became very cordial, insisted on inviting him in for a glass of cider, and said that he was welcome to take 'Rosemary Cottage' for as long as he wanted it, at a cost of a few shillings a week.

The cottage had only two rooms, one up and one down, and a scullery with a tin bath, but it was clean and dry. There was no electricity, so it had to be lighted with a paraffin lamp; and no gas, so Trant would have to do any cooking he found necessary on a 'Primus' stove. But as he didn't plan to stay in the place for more than a month or two in any case, he was perfectly ready to put up with a few inconveniences.

There were, as Denise had said, two ways to get to 'Rosemary Cottage.' One way was to climb out of Okecombe by a winding

secondary road called Tor Lane, past the last house—which was a conveniently-situated pub called the ‘Rod and Line’—round a leafy corner and on for about a hundred yards, where the cottage lay on the right-hand side concealed behind a high hedge of untrimmed bushes. The other way was out along the main Okecombe-Tavistock road and then up a steep sunken hill for about half a mile. From the back of the cottage, there was a fine open view down this hill to the main road and right across the moors to Yes Tor.

Trant paid particular attention to these details, because they affected the convenience of the cottage as a clandestine meeting place, and as the starting point for other plans which were already beginning to simmer in his brain. He decided that everything was most admirably arranged. There was no reason, as far as he could see, why anyone should ever want to pass the cottage at all. The approach up the hill could be made unobserved from everywhere except the moors and the cottage itself. There was even a wide grass verge near the main road at the bottom of the hill where Denise would be able to run her car in behind some bushes. It was true that she would have to walk up the hill, but half a mile was nothing to a healthy young woman—particularly when there was something nice at the end of it.

Trant was very insistent that in no circumstances should they be seen about together anywhere and Denise was in full agreement. Before he left the hospital, he went over with her the ‘story’ which she would tell to Henry to explain her occasional absences. In theory, what she would do would be to drive herself into Exeter after dinner every two or three days for the last house at one of the big cinemas. She would then—according to the ‘story’—have a cup of coffee at one of the late restaurants to refresh her for the drive home. She would get in about twelve-thirty.

In practice, she would leave Exeter in time to arrive at the bottom of Trant’s hill just before dark. She would carefully park the car, walk up the hill, spend a couple of hours or so with Trant and return to the car in time to reach home by twelve-thirty.

Even the smallest details were not overlooked by Trant. He remembered that, owing to a particularly wet spring, the hill up which Denise would have to walk was extremely muddy. “You can’t go home looking as though you’ve been necking in a field,” he said, vulgarly. “Better bring a pair of rubber overshoes and keep them hidden near the parking place.”

Having made final arrangements, Trant suggested that day week for their first meeting, by which time he would have got the cottage in order. Denise agreed. Now that the war was over, and labour restrictions were being gradually relaxed, she would have no difficulty in giving up her job at the hospital and would be entirely free once more to devote herself to the pursuit of pleasure.

The week that followed was a busy one for Trant. He twice ran down into Exeter on his bicycle and bought enough second-hand furniture and equipment in a store there to make the two rooms comfortable. He also asked for the telephone to be installed right away.

Furnishing the house, even on the most modest scale, made big inroads into his small stock of capital but he felt that it was an investment which before very long would yield a high return.

He was quite a handy man about the house and was soon able to take a real pride in the changed appearance of the cottage. He enjoyed preparing his own breakfasts on the 'Primus' and eating them on the little wooden table beside the wide open door with the sweet scent of the countryside wafting in to mingle pleasantly with the smell of eggs and bacon. He arranged with the 'Rod and Line' that they should spare a woman for half-an-hour each morning to come in and clean up for him, and he usually took his lunch at the pub. The weather was refreshing and he was in the highest spirits. He had no responsibilities of any sort, and no cares except those he chose to make. He looked forward with the greatest zest to Denise's visit.

On the night of their first tryst it became cloudy, threatening more rain, and it got dark early. As he sprawled in an easy chair, trying to concentrate on a crime story, all his senses were alert. It was so long since he had had any close relations with a woman that the thought of Denise made his blood race. He knew that, in spite of all their precautions, there remained a slight element of risk, for it was always just possible that someone would recognize the car on its way to the hill or that in the dusk Denise would meet someone who knew her. No intrigue of this sort could be considered one hundred per cent safe. But, anyway, the risk was well worth taking.

As darkness began to fall, he was conscious of distant and receding voices in Tor Lane as the 'Rod and Line' evicted its last customers. Ten o'clock! Then absolute silence fell on the Devon countryside. He had left the cottage door ajar, so that he could hear better. His nerves were tingling with excitement. Suddenly he had a dreadful thought that after all she might not come. Something might have occurred to detain her on this evening. He knew there was no real likelihood, but his attention had been focussed on this coming moment for so long that the idea of anything going wrong now was unbearable. He poured himself a small drink and waited with growing impatience.

In a few minutes his heart bounded as he heard the engine of a car down on the main road. He reckoned it would take Denise just over ten minutes to climb the hill, and those minutes seemed like hours. He went to the door to listen for footfalls on the hill and back to his chair when he failed to hear any.

It was actually just ten-fifteen when he heard a clattering step on the cobbled path outside. He sprang up, and Denise pushed open the door. The lamp-light was too pale to show him how flushed and eager her face was, but he could tell that she was gay and smiling.

"Here I am," she said softly. "Are you glad?"

"Am I glad? I've been going crazy in case you didn't come. You look terrific—wonderful." He helped her off with her light motoring coat, his fingers trembling a little. "Just a minute," he said, "we'd better shut ourselves in." He carefully closed the cottage door and

locked it with a heavy iron key. He had already made sure the curtains covered the entire window.

Denise unwound a silk scarf from her hair and looked eagerly up into his face. "Darling," she breathed, "it's seemed such an age, waiting for this. I thought the days would never go by. Kiss me, and hold me tight."

She was trembling too. He kissed her for the first time, watching her shining eyes. He had never seen her look more beautiful, more desirable. Her lips were as soft as down and as smooth as velvet and she knew how to use them. She pressed her mouth against his and kept it there, hungrily. He could feel her body warm and supple against him and she wriggled in his arms.

He laughed, in sheer delight, and released her. "We've got two hours," he said. "Wonderful, isn't it? Let's sit down. Would you like a drink?"

Denise shook her head. "I don't need any stimulating," she said. "I'm just on top of the world."

He sat down on the divan and she snuggled against him comfortably, so that his arm went round her naturally and he could go on kissing her without effort. She could hardly contain her high spirits. Between kisses she said: "Everything went splendidly. Henry took it all quite as a matter of course and he hasn't the least suspicion. I saw enough of the film to bore him with the story to-morrow. I think he was very relieved I didn't want him to go too. He's just started a new book."

"That's fine," said Trant, gently stroking the delectable curve of her breast. "We'll enjoy that book chapter by chapter! You didn't meet anyone coming up the hill?"

"Not a soul. It's a bit eerie, though. I'm glad you thought of the boots—it's filthy underfoot. Oh, Charles, it's going to be wonderful here."

"Don't be silly," said Trant. "It's wonderful anywhere! I want you, my darling. I've been wanting you all the week. I could really hardly wait. I've been cursing myself for not fixing to meet you two or three days ago."

"I know," said Denise. "I've been just the same." She clung closer to him as he caressed her lightly-clad body with practised fingers and desire consumed her as he slowly, tantalisingly, removed her clothes. She had never been so stirred by a man before, and her experience was not meagre.

. . . . .

Afterwards they sat on the divan in the intimate *négligé* of two of Trant's dressing gowns, and smoked a cigarette in alternate puffs. Denise basked in a glow of delicious well-being. Trant was quizzical and amused.

"We seem to suit each other," he said.

"Oh, Charles, *what* an understatement! It was wonderful. It's never happened to me quite like that before. I can't think now how

I shall ever do without you. What are you grinning at, you horrible man?"

"I was thinking," he said, "that there isn't *really* any mystery about the Mona Lisa smile! You have just the same expression on your face now. It's the complacent smile of the woman who's been physically satisfied."

"Do you think so? We'll examine her very carefully, darling, when we go to Paris together—if we ever do. How I'd love to."

"Who knows? We might—we're only just at the beginning. All things are possible to people with enough nerve."

"At least," said Denise, "we've got other meetings to look forward to. But I don't know how I shall be able to keep away from you. I'm sure I shall need you more, the more I have of you. And Henry will think I've become even crazier about the pictures than I used to be. How often do you think I dare come—three times a week?"

"I should think so. Perhaps even four, if you can find enough different films."

"I wish it was winter, and not summer. Think how marvellous it would be if it got dark at five o'clock instead of ten. Then I could spend whole evenings with you."

"Perhaps it's a good thing," said Trant. "There'll be no danger of a surfeit. Besides, in a month or two the evenings will begin to draw in. We can go to bed and stay there for hours."

"Stop it," said Denise, "I shall begin to want you all over again and there's not time. It seems such a waste that we should have to be separated all through these long summer days."

Trant grinned. "You're not in love with me, sweet one, are you?"

"Of course not," said Denise quickly. "I just want to be with you, that's all. I'd love to laze about with you here at the cottage. I'd like to spend whole nights with you and get up late and cook your breakfast and then sit out with you on the grass afterwards, reading and looking at the view and making plans."

"Perhaps we could meet on the moors, sometimes," said Trant, "when the weather gets really settled again. Some quiet spot in the heather, as I suggested before."

Denise made a face. "I'm sure you'd get bitten in the most inconvenient places," she said.

Trant laughed. "Probably. And you don't like the moors, do you? Well, I can't very well go out with you in the car in daylight; it would be much too conspicuous and I'm sure the ladies around here would be only too delighted to be able to gossip about you."

"I'm sure they would. I always feel they're watching to see if I make a false move. They're all nice and friendly on the surface, but they're just cats underneath. I'm sure they'd love to catch me out."

"Well, we won't let them. We'll have to make do with the evenings."

"I suppose so," said Denise. "Oh, dear, why weren't you a rich man and why didn't I meet you ten years ago? We could have had such fun. I hate being tied to Henry."



"If we'd met then," said Trant, "we'd have quarrelled and separated long ago. You'd have been off in search of fresh fields and so would I. We both know it. That's the sort we are, and it's the sort we like being."

Denise said "M'm." Suddenly she looked at her watch and jumped up. "I say, I must dress," she said. "It's nearly a quarter past twelve. We shall have to buy an alarm clock."

"Glad I don't have to turn out," said Trant lazily. He looked on with unconcealed admiration and interest while Denise slipped his dressing-gown from her naked body and began to dress.

"Do you mind finding something to do?" said Denise, struggling with clothes. "You embarrass me. I must say there's not much privacy in your cottage."

"Dreadful, isn't it?" said Trant, unabashed. He was feeling very pleased with himself. "Well, darling, it's been a great success. Give my regards to Henry and don't let him wear you out to-night."

"You loathsome creature," said Denise. "Charles, when do we meet again?"

"The day after to-morrow?—at the same time?"

"All right—I'll be here without fail. Cary Grant's showing at the Regal."

"Fine," said Trant. "That should put you in a suitably amorous frame of mind. Goodbye, Denise." He kissed her and dismissed her. "I hope you don't meet a policeman on the hill. Sleep well."

"I shall, Charles. Good-night—it's been so lovely." And she slipped away into the darkness. He stood at the door, sniffing the warm scented night air and listening to her receding footsteps. Presently he heard the noise of a self-starter and saw headlights flash on the main road as Denise made for home.

Trant had probably enjoyed no period of his life quite as much as the two or three weeks that followed. He was quite contented that Denise should see him only every other day or so, for he required her for only one purpose. He had never had much use for female companionship throughout the hours of the day and on the whole preferred not to have a woman about the place. He felt freer to carry on his own pursuits. Sooner or later, all women began to fidget and fuss and nag and that was intolerable. It was the night that was made for loving, and every other night was better than every night. It gave him a chance to keep his interest at concert pitch.

He congratulated himself that he had made arrangements which perfectly suited his convenience. It was Denise who had to do all the running about, Denise who had to visit him, Denise who had to dress and go home. And obviously she didn't mind. He could see that she was crazy about him already. In love?—well, perhaps not—she was almost too shallow a woman for that. But fascinated, certainly, and very much under his spell. He had seen the same thing happen many times before, and knew well how to handle women in that condition.

He would keep her just sufficiently at arm's length to make sure that she would still want him. Then, perhaps, later on she would fall in with his evolving plans.

Money was his chief worry. He would soon be at the end of his resources and once he was back in town he would need far more than she could give him. Fancy a little whippersnapper of a scientist like Henry having all that money! It must be completely wasted on him. Day after day, as Trant went happily about his unimportant pursuits, the thought of Henry's fortune bulked more largely in his mind. He often put aside the latest of the great stack of new thrillers that he'd ordered from Exeter and sat with a pre-occupied air, thinking.

He was never bored during these long summer days. He had a keen eye for beauty and there was nothing lovelier in England at this time of year than the panorama of peaceful green fields stretching away below 'Rosemary Cottage' to the river Ockment, and the patchwork quilt of lowland farms up the hill the other side and along the fertile valley on the road to Tavistock. After breakfast he would often take his books and cigarettes outside the cottage and lie out on the grass or take his ease in a camp chair near the door. It was all delightfully restful and quiet after the strain of the war years and with Denise as an exciting background there was little else he needed—for the moment.

He was always ready to exchange a few words with old Mrs. Acland when she came each morning from the pub to clean up for him, and he showed a proper interest in all the local gossip. Almost always he went off just before one, comfortably clad in a short-sleeved shirt and an old pair of flannels, to have a glass of beer at the 'Rod and Line' and eat an excellent country lunch. He became friendly with Fred Barlow, the landlord of the pub, and at the end of the first week gratefully accepted his invitation to join the Okecombe Anglers' Club. Trant had never fished, but he was ready to try anything and soon, under Fred's expert instruction, he was casting quite a pretty fly in the pebbly pools of the picturesque river at the bottom of the hill. Fred said it was only beginner's luck when in the first couple of days he managed to pull in one or two quite fair-sized trout. Often, as he stood in the water above the bridge or sat on the springy turf beside it and listened to Fred discoursing on the mysteries of the piscatorial art, he took cynical pleasure in planning far-from-innocent enterprises while indulging his new taste for this harmless rustic sport.

At other times, when Fred was busy or the weather wasn't suitable for fishing, he would go off on his bicycle into Okecombe for a drink at a different hostelry or perhaps even to the pictures in Exeter. Occasionally, he would ride far afield with a packet of sandwiches and an ordnance survey map in his pocket and discover tiny hamlets of incredible loveliness in half-forgotten valleys. His leg wasn't troubling him any more, and as the days passed he began increasingly to look forward to an early jaunt on the moors.

The second and third and subsequent visits of Denise to the cottage were just as satisfactory to him as the first one had been. As far as

he could see, their arrangements were working perfectly. The cottage was just as deserted at night as he had expected it would be, and there were no unpleasant incidents of any sort. Denise turned up there three or four times a week with unflinching regularity during the next two weeks and the law of diminishing returns seemed to have no application to their amorous pursuits. He became a little bored occasionally, after they had been to bed, when she began to regret that they couldn't see each other oftener, but he realized that the mood of discontent with their circumstances which she made no effort to hide was a mood which he would soon be able to turn to advantage, and he did nothing to discourage her.

Denise, who had always wanted something more than she had got, was soon chafing quite openly at the restraints which caution imposed. The days when she didn't see Trant seemed long and empty, and she found it more and more difficult to keep her temper and not appear irritable to Henry. Greatly though she enjoyed the pictures, she really had no inclination to go dashing off into Exeter, or indeed anywhere, quite so often and yet that was the only way she could risk being out in the late evening. She couldn't possibly go off at ten o'clock without a good excuse, and any excuse which involved other people would be dangerous.

Living with Henry had become much more irksome since she had begun her affair with Trant. It wasn't that Henry was demanding in any way—far from it—but it seemed ridiculous that she should be tied day after day and night after night to her unprepossessing little husband when she could have been having such a marvellous time with her lover. If it hadn't been for his money, she would unquestionably have fixed up a divorce and left him without a pang. Her sense of frustration grew, and she found that her feelings about Henry were changing. She was no longer merely indifferent and rather resentful; there were times when she actively disliked him.

One evening, a little over a fortnight after their first meeting, she arrived a few minutes late at the cottage and found Trant almost buried in a pile of sixpenny crime stories.

"Still reading your old thrillers," she said, snuggling down beside him. "You know, it's I who ought to read them, really. I feel just like a conspirator as I come creeping up the hill in the dark. I'm sure I should scream if I met anybody."

"A screaming conspirator's not much use," said Trant, unfastening the buttons of her blouse with an almost automatic gesture. "But of course, it's true—you are a conspirator. How do you like being engaged in a vulgar intrigue?"

"I think it's fun," said Denise. "I like our little plot. I like the feeling of doing things secretly and getting away with it."

"Good for you! How would you like to plan a murder with me?"

Denise shot bolt upright, and her eyes were scared. "Don't say things like that—*please!*"

Trent laughed and pulled her down again. "I was only joking," he said. "But the way we're fixed, it *is* almost a classic situation for

a murder, isn't it?—a dull middle-aged husband, a huge fortune, and two passionate young lovers who'd like to spend that fortune enjoying themselves. . . .”

Denise was disturbed. “Charles, you wouldn't ever . . .” She searched his face. “You wouldn't ever think of such a thing?”

“Don't be absurd, darling?” said Trant lightly. “Of course I wouldn't. I'd never dare trust you anyway—a woman who can't remember whether she was born in Tromso or Tottenham. Though I must say you seem more interested than shocked at the idea.”

“That's quite untrue, and you know it. I'm horrified. The thought *must* have been in your head.”

“Well. I must have a *little* mental exercise, sitting here alone all day. I like crime stories, as you know and it's fun working things out. But I must say the books I've read don't encourage a fellow to try his hand at murder. The criminal always gets caught. Makes some idiotic mistake. I've sometimes thought I wouldn't mind having a shot at it just to prove to myself that I could do it without making any blunders.”

“That's just your conceit, Charles, you're sure you *are* joking?”

“Darling, I'm just pulling your leg as hard as I can. All the same, it *does* peeve me to think of all that money, and you not being able to get hold of it. Just think if it were yours—and mine, of course. Think what a difference it would make to our lives. No more being buried in the country, no more dull old Henry, no more stolen meetings and having to make excuses. We could spend every night together; see places—Greece, South America, Honolulu; travel in superb liners and *de luxe* trains; swim and dance and lie in the sun together. You could wear wonderful dresses and expensive jewels where they'd be appreciated. You'd be a queen among men—I'd be terribly jealous. I'd fly you about the world in our private luxury plane. We might have a yacht, too, and go and have a look at Tromso Fiord: I'm sure you'd like to see the old homestead! Switzerland, too—crisp snow and sunshine and tanned faces—you'd probably be first-class on skis. We could do all the things that either of us has ever dreamed of doing, and do them in complete untrammelled freedom.” He gently stroked her smooth body. “Couldn't we, darling?”

Denise had been listening without stirring. Now she sat up again. “You almost hypnotised me,” she said. I think you're a very dangerous man!—and you certainly read too many rubbishy books. You wouldn't want to put ideas into my head—would you? *Would* you?”

Trant smiled lazily. “Of *course* not, darling,” he said.

## CHAPTER 8

LIKE most other inhabitants of Okecombe, Henry had heard a good deal about Trant at the time of his plane crash, and Denise had kept

him informed about her patient's progress. When she told him that Trant had taken a cottage somewhere in the district, Henry himself suggested that it would be courteous to ask him over to dinner. Denise promised to try to get in touch with him and send him an invitation. So it happened that after Denise had been Trant's mistress for about three weeks he arrived at the Wycherley home one evening on his bicycle, all open and above board.

Denise held his hand a moment longer than she need have done when she greeted him, but otherwise her behaviour was impeccable. She called Trant 'Charles', achieving just that degree of quiet friendliness which was proper and reasonable considering that she had ministered to him daily for some months. She was a dignified and attentive hostess, but on this occasion kept rather in the background of the conversation, as though she thought that the men wanted to talk.

Henry seemed to like Trant, and they got on well together from the beginning. Over cocktails they talked about the recent ending of the war and what was happening inside Germany. At dinner Trant discoursed modestly but effectively about some of his more exciting flying experiences, and Henry was amusing in his dry way about some of his own expeditions. Over coffee Denise said something about Henry's book and this gave Trant an opportunity to say he'd very much like to see Henry's 'collection,' about which he'd heard a great deal. Henry was naturally delighted and took him up to his top room, where they spent nearly an hour together. When they came down, they were chatting very freely, as though they'd known each other for weeks instead of hours. Trant was in his most engaging mood and delicately flattered Henry with his attitude of youthful deference to a man of science. Henry had little experience of the technique of confidence men and was completely taken in. Denise, who was an expert at the game herself, watched Trant's act with amusement and almost professional pleasure. He was doing as well as she had done at Nice.

In the evening, as the weather had at last turned warm and dry, they sat out on the lawn in deck chairs, looking out over the moors.

"Beautiful spot," said Trant. "I think your view is even better than mine. I don't wonder you like living here."

"I can't imagine a permanent home anywhere else, now," said Henry. "I think even Denise has begun to like it a little. Eh, my dear? You haven't been talking about running up to town so much lately."

Denise smiled her secret smile. "I think the war must have altered my sense of values a bit. I always used to hate the moors, but they seem so peaceful now."

"I must say," Trant agreed, "I find things pretty satisfying here myself. Grand people, good homely food, charming neighbours and plenty of exercise."

"Talking of exercise," said Henry, "how is your leg?"

"Fine, thanks. Just a shade stiff, perhaps, but even that's wearing off. I'm about ready to tackle some of that rough country over there. Denise tells me you do a lot of walking, Mr. Wycherley."

Henry nodded. "A great deal. But, alas, I'm not as young as I was. And the moors are very wet this year—that makes the going much harder. I was over at Cranmere Pool a few days ago, and it's become quite a stretch of water with all the rain. Most unusual."

"Where is Cranmere Pool?" asked Trant.

"Oh, it's a famous guide-book spot—right in the heart of the moor. In a dry season it's hardly a pool at all. In the old days, when there weren't so many hikers as there are now and Dartmoor was almost unexplored except by the local people, it was considered quite a feat for any stranger to get to the pool. Someone put a box up there so that anyone who actually reached it could leave a visiting card as proof of his success. Even now, I daresay that weeks sometimes go by without a single soul setting eyes on the Pool. It must be one of the wildest and loneliest spots in the British Isles."

"Sounds most interesting," said Trant. "Is it far?"

"Oh, no—probably not more than four miles from here as the crow flies. But it's tough going almost all the way. You have to climb the best part of a thousand feet, and practically every foot is a wet one. You see, Dartmoor has a granite base—you can see it outcropping in the tors—and as the water can't drain through, it lies around in the soft vegetable surface. To get to the Pool, you have to pick your way through most difficult stretches of black peat and bog. The best way to start from here is up the left bank of the West Ockment river—you can just see the stream from here, over across the main road." He pointed with his finger. "It's a most exhilarating scramble on a fine day but it can be very wild up there. I've been caught on the top myself in a sudden storm and it's a rather frightening experience. You feel so lost—and you can be, if you don't keep your head."

"Two girls were lost up there last year," said Denise, "and they both died of exposure. Hikers. There was a snow blizzard and they got exhausted. They weren't found for nearly a fortnight."

"Really!" Trant regarded the purple hills with a reflective eye.

"The Moor must have quite a grim reputation."

"Oh, it has," said Henry, with a tinge of something like pride in his voice. "Of course, there's been a lot of nonsense talked about the mires, but I assure you they're pretty bad this year with all the rain we've had."

Trant looked still more interested. "The mires?"

"They're real bogs—dangerous ones—the sort that suck you down. Not that I've ever known an authenticated case of a man being swallowed up, but the farmers around here certainly lose sheep and ponies from time to time. I was talking to Colonel Fletcher about it only yesterday—you know, the Chief Constable—and he was saying some of the farmers were quite concerned this year. The animals are usually rather cautious but in foggy weather it's difficult for them. Oh, yes, the mires are nasty treacherous things. They look beautiful—they have a lovely bright green surface, just asking to be jumped on. We call them 'featherbeds'. Actually, they're just gluey sucking mud, and if you stir them about with a stick they bubble."

Denise gave a little shudder. "Ugh! Hateful!"

"Are they very deep?" asked Trant.

"They vary. I once took a long pole with me on a walk—you know, sort of scout's pole—and prodded about with it just to see. I'm afraid curiosity is one of my vices. Some of the mires were so deep that the whole pole went in—six feet or more. With others, you come to something pretty solid at about three feet."

"Are they concentrated in one part of the moor, or scattered about?"

"Oh, you find them here and there, but the worst ones are over on the other side of the Pool. Half a minute, I'll show you on the map, if you're interested." He smiled as he fished in the wide side-pocket of his jacket. "I have a passion for maps."

"I share it," said Trant. "I've done quite a lot of map work myself—mostly from the air, of course. Ah, the good old inch-to-the-mile—you can't beat it for walking."

Henry got down on his knees and spread out the ordnance survey on the lawn. "Here we are," he said, pointing to Okecombe. "Now, if you strike roughly southwards across the moors you come after about eight miles to the New Bridges Hotel—that's a famous spot. Cranmere Pool is here, just about half way from this house to New Bridges, in a direct line. The bad mires are about a mile beyond the Pool, on the New Bridges side. Roughly here."

Trant studied the map. "I'd like to go up there," he said. "It looks grand walking country."

He caught Denise's eye and looked at her hard and straight. "There's something about those mires that fascinates me."

"You couldn't possibly go all that way with your leg," said Denise quickly. "You shouldn't think of it."

"Oh, I could take it easy," said Trant lightly. "Start early, you know, and have lunch at the Pool."

"I don't think you ought to go alone," said Henry. "I'll tell you what—let's go along together to-morrow—take advantage of this fine spell of weather. I'll be delighted to have your company—I can never persuade Denise to set foot on the moors. And I—er—I'm afraid I enjoy showing off my knowledge of the local topography."

"Well," said Trant, "that's extremely good of you. I'd love it."

"Then we'll make it definite. Let's see—you're in farmer Tolley's cottage, aren't you? That's a good starting point. You know the hill running down from your cottage to the main road?"

Trant nodded, this time avoiding Denise's eyes.

"Right—I'll meet you on the corner at ten o'clock. Don't bother about food—I'll get the girl to pack up lunch for both of us. Just a snack, you know—sandwiches and a thermos. You'll want a pair of good strong boots and some old clothes."

Trant smiled at Denise. "Splendid," he said. "I'm looking forward to a memorable day."

Denise seemed worried. "I still think you shouldn't go," she said.

"You really needn't worry about *me*," said Trant. "I shall be in good hands."

The sun was going down now and it was getting cool. Shortly afterwards Trant got up to leave. Denise seemed on edge and looked as though she wanted to speak to him, but he was curiously reluctant to give her the opportunity. They had just a moment together when Henry was standing at the door and Denise had come down to the road. As Trant was getting on his bicycle she looked at him with something like panic in her eyes and whispered in a low urgent voice "No, Charles—no!"

He smiled, waved his hand, and rode away.

Denise hardly slept a wink that night. Her thoughts were confused, her fears appalling. Why had Trant turned the conversation to those horrible mires? Why had he been so interested in them? He had deliberately angled for an offer from Henry to go with him. He couldn't really enjoy a cross-country walk with a stiff leg. And there had been such a meaning look on his face several times—almost as though he were trying to tell her his plans.

Perhaps he hadn't been joking the other day. Perhaps—perhaps he really intended to kill Henry!

She looked across at her husband, peacefully asleep in his bed a few feet away. There was a moon, and his face was half illuminated. She could just see the beginning of the round bald patch near the top of his head. He looked so small—so different from the way Trant had looked in the hospital bed. He was really only half a man, with his thin features, his scraggy wrists. She had no affection for him. She had lived in his house for nine years, but he meant nothing to her. It was only his money that kept her there. He was an encumbrance—an obstacle in the way of her happiness. The chances were that he would go on getting in her way for years and years. He would probably live to be eighty! She would like him to die!

Like him to die, yes, but not—not murder! God, no—that was a frightful word. Worse than killing. Murder was a crime. Not like forgery; a real crime. People were hanged for it. It was dangerous. That was the real trouble. She wouldn't mind so much if someone just *removed* Henry so that he disappeared from her life. Provided she didn't have to worry about it or have any hand in it. But if there were any risk for her . . .

She turned restlessly from side to side. Probably she was imagining things. Charles must have been joking. He might be capable of murder—she was sure he was capable of it—but that didn't mean he would do it. She had simply read too much into his expression. She was too much under his influence—she studied him too closely. It was a mistake—she had said he would never dominate her, and already he was beginning to.

In the end she sank into uneasy sleep and had a horrible dream.

Henry was concerned about her in the morning. "You look tired, my dear. Is anything the matter?"



She shook her head. "Nothing much—I must have caught a slight chill last night. I'll rest to-day."

"Perhaps you'd like me to stay at home with you—I could easily send Betty over to tell Trant that I can't come after all."

Denise wavered. She could stop him if she wanted to. But now her fears seemed absurd. It was a bright sunny morning. The moors looked friendly. She had let her imagination get the better of her in the darkness of the night.

"I'll be all right," she said. "It's nothing—I'll take an aspirin. Charles will be so disappointed if you don't go."

Half an hour later she gave him her cheek to kiss and he went ambling off down the road with a big rucksack on his meagre back and his old white panama hat catching the sunlight. At the corner, he turned and waved. Denise felt slightly sick.

. . . . .

The night had been long, the day seemed longer; Denise found a pair of Henry's field glasses and around ten-thirty she was able to watch the two men picking their way up through the boulders at the side of the river. Charles was wearing shorts and carried a stick. He was bareheaded. His leg didn't seem to be troubling him. She couldn't see their faces. Once they stopped, and Henry pointed to something. Then they disappeared round the shoulder of a hill.

Momentarily, Denise felt reassured. Looking at them climbing together, it was difficult to believe that one of them could be thinking of murder. But as the hours dragged on, she found that her fears were mounting again. She couldn't read; she couldn't even listen to the radio. She thought of going off to the pictures but decided she couldn't bear to be away from the house. They might come back; *he* might come back! Suppose it was just *he*? Would he dare to come back to the house alone? Surely not—it would be much too dangerous.

This was the worst day she had spent since the day she got rid of her child. The suspense grew and grew. She wished she had never met Charles. He was a devil—a fascinating devil. She hated him! No, she loved him! At least, she always wanted him. Suppose he had *done* it . . . ? But he couldn't have. He would be found out. People would have seen him go off with Henry. How could he explain? They would say that he and she had been friendly at the hospital and when they found that the money came to her, they would put two and two together. *She* would be suspected as well as he. God, what a fool she had been to let them go.

How this day might alter her life! If Henry came back—and of course he *would* come back—then there'd be the old dreary existence with stolen passionate moments and that dreadful insecurity. If he didn't—just *supposing* he didn't—then perhaps they'd get away with it and be able to live that wonderful life that Charles had pictured. Charles wasn't stupid—he was clever. Surely she could trust Charles.

She tried to sleep a little in the afternoon, but her thoughts kept on whirling round and round and she couldn't compose her mind. She got up and made an early cup of tea and wondered if they were on their way back. She would have liked to get the field glasses again and search the river bank, but she suddenly thought that if Betty, the maid, saw her, and then if anything happened, her anxiety might seem suspicious.

She waited and waited. At five o'clock she imagined she heard a footstep on the path outside the house: she must try not to be agitated, in case it was Henry. She made a tremendous effort to control herself.

The door opened and Betty came in. "Mr. Trant's here, ma'am." Denise stood like a statue. "Alone!"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Trant came to the door. He was smiling, cheerful. "Hello!" he said. "You can't let me have a pair of old slippers, can you? I had to leave my boots on the path—they're so muddy."

Denise, white-faced and scared, clutched his arm. "Henry! Where's Henry?"

"Oh, *he's* coming along," said Trant cheerfully. "He popped into the chemist's for some more chloroform or something, and there was a bit of a crowd, so I said I'd come on and see that the kettle was boiling. We've both got a thirst, I can tell you."

Denise sank into a chair, and something like a sob escaped her. "Oh, Charles, you frightened me so."

"Frightened you, darling? Why?"

"I . . ."—she glanced at the door—"I thought you'd—killed him!"

"Good gracious, what an idea! You'd better get a grip on yourself before he comes in. You should have more self-control."

"I can't help it," she said. "It's been awful—the suspense. I could have sworn you—you meant to do it. There was something in your eyes . . ."

Trant watched her narrowly. "And are you glad or sorry now that I didn't?"

The colour had come back into her cheeks. She got up and went over to the window and began making up her face.

"Well?" he said.

"I . . . oh, Charles, I don't really know."

He smiled. "When you *do* know, my angel, perhaps we *will* do something about it. You'll feel better next time. There's nothing like a little inoculation!"

## CHAPTER 9

"In certain circumstances," said Trant, "we could dispose of Henry quite safely."

It was three days after his walk on the moor, and once again he was sitting with Denise in the cottage. They were very comfortable. She was relaxed on the settee sipping a brandy and ginger ale and he was smoking a cigarette in a low armchair and drinking whiskey.

The inoculation had had some effect on Denise. She had for the time being used herself up emotionally on the subject of murder, and could now listen to Charles talking about it with a feeling almost of detachment.

She said: "Just as a matter of interest, what *are* those circumstances?"

"Well," said Trant, as though about to deliver a lecture on his favourite theme, "first of all we should have to be able to trust ourselves and each other. I imagine that when a murder has been committed—it's a good thing to get used to the word—one of the greatest dangers is that at some point the murderer may lose his nerve. The danger is probably greater when there are two murderers, because then they may react on each other. If—a pure supposition of course—you and I were to decide to get rid of Henry, we should have to be absolutely certain that we could trust our nerves—in all circumstances. We should have to prepare ourselves in advance for certain rather—well, repulsive—incidents in connection with the murder itself; we should have to expect some gruelling questioning; and we should have to exercise a good deal of self-control in not seeing much of each other for a time. It wouldn't be any good going into this imagining it was going to be easy; it would be tough, and we should have to be as hard as nails."

"That would be no effort for you," said Denise. "I don't believe there's any flesh and blood in your make-up."

"Oh, you don't. You didn't think that half an hour ago."

Denise ignored the remark. "As far as I'm concerned," she said, "I've handled some fairly difficult situations at various times. I don't think you could call me soft."

"If I could," said Trant, "I wouldn't be having this discussion with you. Well, the next question would be how far we could trust each other. Now I'm not a child, and you're a woman of the world. We know how difficult it is to trust people in critical situations. When there's real danger, it's better to trust no one. But if we went into this together—and I repeat the whole thing's in a purely exploratory stage—we should *have* to trust each other and we *could*—for one very simple reason. If we were found out, we should be hanged—both of us. I should be hanged for being the actual instrument of disposal and you would be hanged as a willing accessory. How does that appeal to you?"

"If you are trying to make me get used to the idea of being hanged, my dear Charles, you're wasting your time. I can only say I'm glad this is all theoretical."

Trant grinned. "I was merely pointing out that if things went wrong we should both be in equal danger. Consequently, we could trust each other. It wouldn't be any good my trying to put the blame

on you, or your going and telling the police that it was all my fault, because the facts would prove the opposite—and just to be on the safe side, we'd have to see that they did. Go halves in fact—in responsibility and in rewards."

"Rewards? Oh, you mean the money?"

"Exactly. At the present moment, we're both very fond of each other and I'm sure when the money came to you you'd want to go on living with me in various parts of the world and we'd have that grand time we were speaking of the other day. But I wouldn't want to tie you down, and I'm sure you wouldn't want to tie me—though you're so lovely that I can't imagine I should ever want to leave you. However, that's not the point—it's much better to be businesslike. So I think we'd have to agree that when the will was proved and you had the fortune safely in your hands, you'd make over half of it to me. We wouldn't announce the fact of course—there are ways of doing it quietly, so that no connection can be traced."

"This is a fascinating game," said Denise. "You really do think of everything, don't you. Tell me what you'd do if I agreed to all your plans, and then, when Henry had been . . . well . . ." She couldn't say it.

"Murdered," said Trant.

"All right—murdered—I suddenly decided that I was going to keep the whole fortune for myself, as I could. What could you do about that?"

Trant took a sip of whiskey. "I'm sure it wouldn't happen," he said. "I believe you'd play fair. If you didn't—well, I'd be rather desperate. I mean, a man who's committed one murder for money might easily commit a second one for revenge."

"Charles! How can you?"

"My dear, you suggested the only circumstances which would make that likely. They won't arise, so there's nothing to fear."

"You're a hateful man. I don't know why I have anything to do with you."

"Because you know that I can get you what you want and give you what you want. And my attitude to you is the same."

"Cold-blooded beast! All right, go on with your story."

"Well, now that we're satisfied about each other, we're ready to go ahead with consideration of the murder. I don't mind telling you that, as a sort of mental tonic, I've given a good deal of thought to the technical aspects of the subject. Judging by the literature, there seem to be thousands of ways of bumping people off. The trouble with most of them is that they're far too complicated. Whatever method they choose, murderers seem to get tangled up in all sorts of detail and then they leave clues lying about. If they choose poison, they have to get the poison, which isn't easy; and administer it, which isn't at all simple, I'm sure; and they have to worry about fingerprints and nearly always leave too many or not enough. If they choose a gun, there's always the question of whose gun it was and where it came from and whether anyone heard the shot—and you

can bet your boots there'll always be somebody around at the wrong time."

"So far, you're not very encouraging."

"Oh, but wait a minute. There's one sort of murder which is fairly simple and safe and that's the sort that looks like an accident. Just suppose, for instance—for the sake of argument—that Henry and I happened to be walking along the top of the cliffs in North Devon on a rather windy day. Suppose we chose an isolated spot and at a suitable moment I picked the little man up and heaved him over the cliff. I could say he'd been blown over. People might suspect me, but they could never prove anything. What's wrong with that?"

"Lots of things," said Denise. "In the first place, Henry would make you walk on the side nearest the cliff and a long way from it. He's far too careful to walk near the edge of a cliff. In the second place, he'd probably pull a button off your coat as he fell and the police would find it clasped in his hand. Or else he'd break his fall by catching hold of a bush, and not be killed outright, and die in the arms of a coastguard murmuring 'Trant did it.'"

Trant gave a guffaw. "You're damn right. I *had* thought of some of those things. All the same, the general idea is sound—to stage something that looks like an accident."

"As far as I can see," said Denise, "the real trouble is that however it happened it would look pretty fishy if *you* were there. There's too much motive about. However careful we were afterwards, they'd know that you were a friend of the family and because of the hospital a friend of mine and if we were ever seen together afterwards it would look most suspicious. Besides, what sort of a man would allow another man to have a fatal accident in his company? I thought the other day when you were on the moors that you meant to push him into one of the mires and then say he fell in. But you'd never get away with that. They'd ask what you did about it. He's such a small man. Anyone could pull him out."

"Naturally, I never had any such idea. Murders have to be planned carefully, like a military campaign, and accomplices have to be briefed. You'd have realized that if you'd thought calmly for a moment. No, you're quite right. But there are other ways of making accidents look normal."

"You could hit him over the head with a piece of rock, of course, and say he'd fallen off a tor. But then the police would make you show them exactly where he fell, and they'd probably decide that if he'd really fallen off there the wound would have been a different size and a different shape, and they'd expect bruises and wouldn't find any, and finally they'd discover a piece of rock on the top of the tor with a bloodstain and three grey hairs and—as you say—we'd both be hanged. No, Charles, nothing doing!"

"But this is all exploratory. You still haven't heard my suggestion. I'd stage an 'accident' at a place where Henry appeared to have been by himself. Is there any reason, for instance, why he shouldn't fall into one of those mires while he was on his own. Theoretically?"

"You heard what he said the other day. He's never heard of an authenticated case of a man being lost in them. Neither have I. Neither have the police around here."

"But it couldn't be ruled out. There has to be a first time for everything—doesn't there, darling? And if animals can fall in, why not a man?"

"Not Henry. He knows them too well. He'd be the last person to do it."

"I'm not so sure. I had a good look at them when I was up on the moor with him the other day. There are some lying under jutting crags of rock and we walked over the rocks and looked down. Now Henry is very sure-footed, I agree, but if he were to walk fast over some of that ground the possibility couldn't be ruled out that he might slip and take a header."

"Henry doesn't walk fast—you should have noticed that. He absolutely moons along."

"We'd have to make him walk fast!"

"Charles, this is very thrilling but I really don't follow you. You said that you weren't going to be there. How could you make him walk fast?"

"I said I was going to *appear* not to have been there. Now I'll tell you my idea. I'm going to make Henry a wager."

"I still don't follow. Go on."

"You know how keen he is on walking, and how proud he is of his local knowledge. Well, I'm going to prod him into accepting a challenge from me to see who can get to Cranmere Pool first. It would be fair enough—he's a little old and I'm a little lame. We'd start from different directions. I'd set out from here, and he'd start from the New Bridges Hotel, which is almost exactly the same distance from the Pool. He'd take the miry side because he knows the mires—and it might be dangerous for me! As it would be for a wager, he'd have to walk fast. That would explain to an otherwise sceptical local constabulary how a man with Mr. Wycherley's flair for the moors could make such a silly mistake."

"Very clever," said Denise. "But . . ."

"Wait a minute. The 'mistake' would be organized by me. The mires are over beyond Cranmere Pool—that is, they'd be well on his half of the itinerary. I should have to do a bit of wangling to get to them at the same time as he did. I've thought that out—I'll tell you about it later. So, instead of meeting just half-way, at the Pool, we should meet at the mires. They're absolutely deserted and right on the top of the moor. There's not a soul about, and you can't be overlooked. I should meet him and—murder him. A very simple job. I should leave his body in the mire, come back the way I'd gone, and report that he hadn't turned up."

"But they mightn't believe you. How would you be able to prove, if necessary, that he hadn't been delayed by something—a stitch, say—and that you hadn't gone on beyond the Pool and killed him."

"It's all a question of timing. I told you we should have to do some wangling. I've got a plan in my mind by which the time of Henry's unfortunate demise would be exactly known, and it would be shown to be absolutely impossible that I could have been there at that time. Mind you, all these precautions probably wouldn't be necessary, because it's quite likely the accident would be accepted at its face value. But just in case, they would give me a sound alibi."

"I thought that alibis were always broken."

"Not if they're simple and skilfully arranged. You can leave that to me."

"All right, what happens when you come back?"

"Well, I naturally call on you first to tell you that Henry didn't turn up—oh, I forgot to tell you that you would drive him over to New Bridges in the morning and see him off safely. You are surprised and a little disturbed but you know he's capable of taking care of himself, so you don't worry until it gets dark. Then you ring up your good friend the Chief Constable and ask him to call round as you're afraid something may have happened to your husband on the moors. Along comes the Colonel, and we tell him about the wager and what happened. Next day he sends out a search party."

"Not much good searching for a body that's sunk in a mire. And if it's not discovered, then it may be years before I get the money. I'm sure there'd be all sorts of legal complications."

"It'll be found all right. Perhaps not the first day, but fairly soon. You see, Henry will be wearing his old panama and it'll be lying on top of the mire, rather dirty. Also he'll have one arm sticking out, just to make it easier."

"Give me some brandy," said Denise. "Really, I think we've played this silly game long enough. It's becoming gruesome."

"Oh, *you* won't have anything to do with that particular unpleasantness. The search party will bring him down and he'll be washed up and look quite presentable when you're called upon to identify him at the inquest. Everyone will sympathise with you in your tragic loss, and there'll be columns and columns written about him in the local and national papers—loss to science and all that bunk—and you'll make a most attractive widow. It'll all go perfectly smoothly, I assure you. There'll be no trouble with his will and in a few months the whole thing will be behind you and we'll be able to go off to the South Seas and live happily ever after."

"Something would go wrong. I know it would. I haven't made a study of murders as you obviously have, but I know things *always* go wrong—unexpected things. Things you can't deal with at the last moment. That alibi, for instance."

"It's too simple for anything to go wrong. The whole thing is a question of minutes. First of all, we should have to establish the time at which the 'accident' took place. I should do that by putting the hands of Henry's watch back a few minutes and stopping it by letting a little water in. By the way, we must make sure he wears a watch—he's an absent-minded blighter. They'd expect the watch

to have stopped, so that's perfectly in order. Right, that would establish the time. The question then would be, could I have got there? Answer, absolutely impossible. If they've any doubt about it, they'll try it for themselves, you know, reconstructing the crime. Some suspicious johnny will set out from 'Rosemary Cottage' and try to beat my time. He'll find he can't—partly because of my juggling with Henry's watch and partly because I shall actually not walk down the half-mile to the main road at all, but cycle down it. Instead of taking perhaps six or seven minutes to walk, I'll be down in a minute—the hill's very steep. You know that haystack in the field at the bottom with the loose hay all around it. I'll hide the bike there. No one will find it—Tolley has a lot of stacks nearer his farm and I'll only be away a few hours. You see how simple it is. There'll be no danger of meeting anybody as I go down the hill because I've a clear view from the cottage right to the bottom and you don't get a soul on that hill for days on end. I'll collect the bicycle after dark. There'll be another thing in favour of the alibi—my leg. They'll be certain to make big allowances for that, particularly if I complain a bit afterward and say it aches."

"Heavens, how you've thought it all out. You sound quite enthusiastic."

"Well, it's pitting one's brains and nerve against the other fellow—in this case, the police. We had to do the same sort of thing in a way on bombing raids. I believe we can pull it off quite safely—and look what we get out of it. Don't forget that, Denise—a few days of excitement and anxiety, perhaps, and then a straight future with no Henry in the way. We might even get married if we wanted to."

"Now you're really being rash. Well, I still think that things might go wrong."

"They won't—we'll think of everything. Before we start, I'll go over every single detail in my mind from the very beginning to the very end and deal with all possibilities. It's easy if you do that. You imagine the whole set-up—Henry setting off with you in the car at the appointed time ready for a start from New Bridges at, say ten o'clock on a fine morning, and me checking out of the 'Rod and Line' also sharp at ten (so that everyone knows my starting time), and giving the hill the once-over, and racing down in a few seconds, hiding the bike with a weather eye open for people, then beating it at my best pace up the river bank and on to the moors. I see it all. The meeting with Henry, too—no difficulties at all. He's small, he won't struggle, he'll sink quietly. I've found the exact spot, very near to where he'll be passing by. I'll probably go up there several times in the next week and learn the lie of the land so that I can't forget it. Pity you can't come too and see how easy it will be."

"Nothing would induce me—and this is all theory, anyway."

"Of course—and during those practice walks I'll learn the wet patches of ground to avoid, and the short cuts, and I'll probably knock several minutes off the time that any other man would take and that'll strengthen the alibi."



"But just suppose the entirely unexpected happened. Suppose that on that particular day someone decided to walk up the hill to 'Rosemary Cottage' or suppose someone else chose that day to try and find Cranmere Pool?"

Trant shrugged. "In that case, it would be just bad luck—we'd have to call the whole thing off and try something else. Remember we won't be committed in any way until the actual moment when I meet Henry. I shouldn't go on with it if anything had gone wrong in the meantime. He'd just think I was a mighty fine walker and I'd win the bet. I tell you it's fool-proof!"

"You almost convince me," said Denise, getting up and stretching lazily. "Happily, we don't have to take the chance. But it has been an interesting conversation. You should write a book about it—you might earn quite a lot of money."

"When I've got half Henry's fortune," said Trant, "I shan't need to earn money."

Denise suddenly turned upon him. "Are you really serious, Charles?"

"Of course, I'm serious, my dear! And you will be when you've thought it over and the idea's sunk in a bit. Look what we stand to gain; wealth, freedom, everything, all by a little thought and a few hours unpleasantness. What's the alternative? I can't go on living here like this—apart from the fact that you can come here occasionally, I don't like the life, and you don't like it either. I'm not going to rot in this hole. Besides, I've got no money."

"I've got some," said Denise.

"What have you got?—a few hundred, a thousand or two. Pin money! I'm talking about *real* money—enough to establish us both in security and luxury for life. If I can't get it one way, I'll get it another. I'll go off and find someone else somewhere who'll play ball with me."

"You know very well you won't find anyone as satisfactory as me. But please yourself. I'm not going to do a murder."

"You don't have to do it! *I'll* do it. You simply have to sit tight and play a part. You've done that all your life, you little adventuress, and you can go on doing it. You like doing it. It's true you'll share the very faint risk there may be, but I'll do all the dirty work, all the planning, all the active part. Your sole contribution will be to take Henry to New Bridges in a motor car and wave him goodbye. And then to shed a discreet tear or two when the right people are about. My dear girl, you'll do it on your head."

"Henry may not like the idea of your wager walk," said Denise lamely.

"Don't you believe it—he'll jump at it. We'll make it fifty guineas a side and the proceeds to the Cottage Hospital. It's about the only sort of publicity he'd like—having it known that he's a real man of the moors. You just ask me over to dinner in two or three days' time, and I'll turn the conversation the way I want it and have Henry poring over a map in a brace of shakes. I tell you he'll adore it.

That's the beauty of the plan—he'll practically bring it on himself. Maybe he *will* fall into a mire and then we shan't have to do anything."

"It would be too bad if he did," said Denise. "He'd do it at the wrong place and the wrong time and then you wouldn't have any alibi at all and they'd still be just as suspicious and you'd probably be hanged—and you'd deserve it! I won't have anything to do with it."

"Oh, you won't? On what grounds. Not morality, I hope!"

"No. On the grounds that it's too dangerous. I'm scared when I think of it."

"You won't be," said Trant with assurance. "It's just a case of getting used to the idea, as I've said before. It seems risky to-day, but when you've gone over the details a few times in your mind you'll see how beautifully everything fits in. It would be a crime not to try out a plan that's really perfect!"

"I still won't. At least, I don't think so."

"Will you ask me to dinner in a day or two, at least? And see how things go?"

Denise smiled. "Of course," she said. "There's no harm in asking anyone over to dinner. I'm sure Henry will be delighted to have you. He likes you so much."

"I like him," said Trant. "He's one of the nicest little men I've ever met."

## CHAPTER 10

THE fine weather held, and Trant spent the next three days on the moors. It was absolutely essential that he should cut down his walking time to the barest minimum, so the first thing was to make sure that he wouldn't lose his way. He must be able to go forward without even a moment's uncertainty or hesitation.

The first part of the route was clear. At the bottom of the hill, on the other side of the main road, there was a gate into a forty-acre field. Across the field there was another gate and a second field which brought you to the bank of the Ockment river. Actually it was a shallow pebbly trout stream, and you could cross it at this point on stepping stones.

Then the ground began to rise gently round the shoulder of a hill. Exploring the hillside, Trant discovered a narrow dry sheep-track which ran round the contour line for a couple of hundred yards. This was definitely better than the river path, which was extremely wet.

The sheep-track led to a gap in a stone wall—a useful gap, for the wall was high and would have taken several seconds to climb. Beyond it was another broad sloping field of very rough pasture, with a lot of heather. Trant soon discovered that heather was a bad thing to walk in. It clung to the ankles and cut down speed enormously. But there were swathes of close-cropped grass like natural paths and

one of these, according to Trant's compass, led in the right direction. There was one more stone wall—this time a gate would have to be vaulted. After that the open moor stretched ahead, with only natural obstructions.

Trant was already beginning to learn a good deal about this sort of walking. He discovered that it was far better to charge straight up a steep slope than to negotiate it gradually on the diagonal—a course which involved walking for long distances on the sides of your feet. He also came to distinguish at a distance between dry spots and wet and to veer away from all places where the swamp-loving cotton grass was growing. At the same time he decided that while you could get round any wet patch by making a sufficient detour, it was sometimes quicker to go straight ahead, jumping from tussock to tussock.

Once on the open moor, it was necessary to memorise landmarks, and there weren't very many of them. But Trant had been trained to be observant in the air, and he noticed and remembered small things. A dark patch of turf here, the shape of a hill there, a stunted tree on the sky-line, a sheep-fold or shelter, a peculiar boulder. He didn't hurry on these reconnoitring expeditions. Once or twice he tried alternative routes on considerable stretches, timing himself. The river Ockment, continually winding backwards and forwards across his path, indicated the general direction, for its source was at Cranmere Pool. It was now little more than a fast-running mountain beck, to be avoided for the most part because all the ground around it was sodden. On one stretch, however, it was very helpful, for it rushed steeply down a boulder-strewn bed and by leaping from boulder to boulder Trant found he could gain several hundred feet very quickly without getting off his course.

The last thousand yards, skirting the Pool and dropping down to the mires, was the worst problem. It was bare black ground, without any vegetation of any sort, and its peaty surface was cut by innumerable pools and streams, some of them too wide to jump. The peat hummocks were of fantastic shape between the pools and the whole aspect of the place was as ugly and forbidding as anything that Trant had ever seen. The hummocks were springy and quite good to walk on, but it was like a maze—you could find your way through it once, but that was no guarantee that you would be able to pick the same path next time. Trant was really worried about this stretch—it seemed to him that it would be quite possible to lose a full ten minutes. On the second day, therefore, he brought with him a bundle of short sticks and he marked out a path for himself through the lumps of peat. There was little chance that anyone would notice the sticks who wasn't actually looking for them, and even if they were noticed there would be nothing to connect Trant with them. He could collect them up and bury them in the soft ground on the way back from his meeting with Henry.

On the third day of his exploration Trant decided to time himself over the whole route. The walk went very sweetly. Going almost, but not quite, all out he covered the four difficult miles from 'Rosemary Cottage' to the mires he had chosen for his purpose in ninety-seven

minutes. He felt confident that no one, without previous exploration, could do it in anything like that time.

On the way back that day, he had a look at the haystack where he was going to leave his bicycle. There was a lot of hay scattered round the stack and there was also a big bundle of it under a hedge about ten yards away. He decided that that would make the ideal hiding place.

Trant's preparations were now practically completed. He'd need some chloroform, but he could arrange with Denise to get hold of that a little later and bring it to the cottage. Otherwise, the only outstanding task was to persuade Henry to undertake the walk.

Meanwhile, Denise had been doing some hard thinking. She knew now that Trant was determined to go through with his plan, and she had got to decide quickly whether to help him or prevent him. He could not carry the scheme through by himself: she could still insist she would have nothing to do with it and that would be the end of the whole thing. She knew also that that would inevitably mean a complete break with Trant.

She was still turning over in her mind the details of the plan as Trant had outlined them when something happened between her and Henry which made a prompt decision imperative. One evening after dinner as they were sitting together taking coffee on the lawn, he suddenly said to her: "Denise, my dear, I wanted to tell you that I'm planning to leave you for a little while soon."

"Leave me? You mean you're going away somewhere?"

"If you don't mind. You see, now that the war's over the committee of the Society are anxious to get some field work started again. I had a letter from an old friend of mine yesterday—you remember Arbuthnot, he was on the Brazilian expedition with me—and he says there's a plan on foot for an expedition to Russia. The idea is to get going almost at once so that we can be back well before the winter."

Denise nodded. "I expect you'd enjoy that. Well, you know I've nothing against it."

"No, you're always very good about my little journeys. I'm getting a bit old, you know—another ten years, and my globe-trotting days will be over. I want to make the most of the opportunities that remain. We shall probably be leaving in two or three weeks and be away about three months."

"You'll just about have time to finish your book before you go."

"I intend to, yes. Er—there's one other small matter that I wanted to tell you about. You know I've always wanted to found a chair in natural history at my old university. It was just a question whether I should leave instructions and the necessary bequest in my will, or arrange it all while I was still alive. I hope you'll think it's a pardonable weakness when I say I'd rather like to get it established right away so that I can see how it works out. One of the troubles is that our financial position isn't quite what it was. War taxation has been severe and capital has depreciated in value. So this bequest will

make a rather bigger hole than I had expected. I've been going into the position with my solicitor, and there should be about a hundred thousand pounds for you after all duties have been paid."

"I never knew how much you had," said Denise cautiously. "That sounds a lot to me. How much will this chair or whatever it is cost you?"

"About fifty thousand pounds. You see, the bequest has to provide an income of not less than £1,500 a year and it looks as though one can't bank on a gilt-edged return of more than about 3 per cent. I want to be on the safe side."

"It seems a lot of money," Denise couldn't help saying. "Just to give away like that. But it's yours, and I know you've looked forward to using it this way."

"I knew you wouldn't mind," said Henry gratefully.

. . . . .

But Denise minded a great deal. What he had said about his financial position had given her rather a shock. It looked very much as though she had over-estimated his wealth from the beginning.

Now he was proposing to give away a considerable part of it. Left alone, he was good for many more years yet and before he died a natural death who could tell how much more he might squander in expeditions and research and gifts? The plain fact was that if he died now she would get the best part of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds in cash. If he lived on, and continued to give rein to his philanthropic instincts, there was simply no telling what she would get.

Up till now, she had been balanced on the edge of indecision. This settled it. They must get Henry out of the way while his fortune was still intact, and they must do it now while opportunity offered.

Once Denise had made up her mind, she became as hard and practical as she had been when she was scheming to marry Henry on the Riviera. For nine years she had put up with what almost amounted to a term of imprisonment with Henry. Now she was going to be released.

A couple of evenings later, she invited Trant over to dinner again. Henry, who had been slogging away at his book all day, was delighted to see him.

"I'm afraid I've been staying in since we had our walk together," he told Trant. "Too much writing is a bad thing."

"You're looking a bit peaky, if you'll forgive my saying so," said Trant. "You need a break. Look here, we probably shan't have another spell of weather like this all through summer. Why don't we spend another day on the moors?"

"I see they're beginning to exert their spell on you. Well, I dare say I could tear myself away for just one day."

"Just as you think best. I don't want to wear you out with two long walks so close together. I expect you find that rough country a bit exhausting."

"Not in the least, I assure you." Henry seemed to resent the implication that he was getting decrepit.

"I'd adjust my pace to your pace," said Trant. "Remember I've had a lot of exercise these past few days—I'm a good deal fitter than I was. I wouldn't like to walk you off your legs."

Henry chuckled. "I'm afraid you've got the wrong idea about walking on the moors. It isn't so much a question of strength—it's a question of agility and of method. The expert learns to conserve his energies. It's steady plodding that counts—and knowledge of the ground."

Trant smiled. "I'd back my strength against your experience any day—in spite of my legs. I bet I could beat you hollow in a race to Cranmere Pool!"

"Dear me," said Henry. "I'm not a betting man, you know, but I must say that's a very attractive proposition. I don't think I've been offered a wager on such favourable terms for twenty years. How much would you feel inclined to bet?"

"Well," said Trant, "if you like the idea let's make it really worth while. Say fifty guineas a side, and the proceeds to go to the Cottage Hospital. It would be rather amusing—we could send a report to the local paper. We might set up a local record."

Henry's eyes were bright. "It would certainly be exciting," he said. "What do you think, my dear?"

Denise's face was impassive. Trant was watching her closely. She said "Why not, if you think you'll enjoy it."

"I'll tell you what would make it even more interesting," said Trant. "Let's start from different sides of the moor, and see who gets to the Pool first. Denise could run one of us over to New Bridges in the car—that's about the same distance. It would be much more fun—then we shouldn't know who'd won until the very last moment. Otherwise, if we started from the same spot, the race would be virtually over, one way or the other, after the first mile."

Again Trant caught Denise's eye as Henry took out his map.

"Yes," said Henry. "I think that would be fair enough. As a matter of fact, if we took your cottage as one starting point and the New Bridges Hotel as another, the Pool would be exactly half way between the points. And I think the ground's just about equally difficult both ways. Which side would you like?"

Trant took the chance. "I'm the challenger. It's your choice."

Henry considered. "As you're already in the cottage, and Denise will have to run one of us over to New Bridges, I should think it would be better if I took the New Bridges side."

"Fine," said Trant. "It's rather mean of me, perhaps, but I do know this side better and I wouldn't be too happy walking fast through those mires."

"Do we need any rules?"

"Well, I suggest no running—that would wear us both out. Just fast walking, by any route we like. No riding on the back of Dartmoor ponies! Regulation walking costume—rucksack, lunch and stick."

"Maps and compass?"

"I'm afraid I'll need them—particularly the compass."

"I warn you, you haven't a chance," said Henry. "I shall be making twenty yards every time you consult your compass. You might just as well write a cheque to the hospital here and now."

Trant laughed. "You forget my long legs. My stride must be half as much again as yours."

"Shall we tell the *Okecombe Gazette* before we start?" asked Henry. "They might give us a send-off."

Trant looked doubtful. "Just as you like—but it might be better to tell them afterwards. Suppose it rains. We don't want to make a burden of the walk by going if it's wet—better to wait for a fine day—and we should look rather silly if we had a lot of friends and newspapermen there, and had to call it off."

"Perhaps you're right," Henry agreed. "Let's make it the day after to-morrow—I've got a chapter I must finish."

"Good. Start at ten, eh? Denise drives you round to New Bridges and you leave the hotel there sharp on the hour. I leave the cottage at the same time. On the assumption we walk about level, how long do you think it should take to the Pool?"

Henry considered. "I don't want to demoralise you, but I've covered the distance from New Bridges to Cranmere in under two hours. We should be there in nice time for lunch."

Trant grinned. "I'll have cocktails all ready for you."

"If you two men have finished boasting about what you're going to do," said Denise, "we can have dinner."

When he left that evening, Denise accompanied Trant to the gate. He gripped her arm. "Good girl," he said. "I knew I could count on you. Now listen. Come to the cottage to-morrow night. You won't need to stay long, but there are a few things we must discuss. Before you leave for the pictures, take some chloroform from Henry's room and bring it with you. Do it while he's in the garden. He won't miss it for one night and if he does it'll be too late. Don't forget—that's vital. And don't spill it around the car. See you to-morrow—we're all set." He threw a leg over his bike and pedalled off.

When Denise reached the cottage the following night, Trant was writing. He turned as she entered. "Did you get the chloroform?"

"Yes—nearly a bottleful. It smells a bit."

"Did you have any trouble?"

"None. He won't notice, I'm sure—it was behind some other bottles. We'll have to put it back afterwards—the chemist may remember."

"Good for you," said Trant, making a note. "Anything new?"

"Henry's very keen on the race. He's like a little boy. Oh, there's one thing—it was really what decided me." And she told him about the money and Henry's plans for a trip abroad.

Trant whistled. "We're just about in time."

"Give me a drink," said Denise, "and tell me about things. Have you been out on the moors?"

"I'll say I have. I've got that walk taped. The timing is going to be perfect."

"I hope no one saw you spending all that time going over the ground. It might look a bit odd afterwards."

"Don't worry—in three days I've seen only four people and those were all in the distance—they couldn't possibly have recognized me. I did the walk to the mire the day before yesterday in an hour and thirty-seven minutes from the cottage. You heard Henry say it would take him nearly two hours to the Pool. I've been working out a rough timetable for the two of us. I leave here at ten sharp and at 10.01 I'm on the main road. That knocks six minutes off the ninety-seven. I estimate I shall be at the mire or near enough to make no odds a shade before eleven-thirty. It doesn't really matter where I meet Henry within a few hundred yards—I've got that fixed. He can't possibly be at the mire before eleven-forty—it's a good ten minutes from there to the Pool, and he reckoned nearly two hours all the way. I shall have heaps of time."

"What about the alibi?"

"That's going to be O.K. I could almost manage without fiddling with Henry's watch, considering that I gain six minutes cycling down the hill here, but it's a rather small margin and I'd better be on the safe side. I mustn't overdo it, though—if I set his watch back too much some busybody is bound to walk up from the other end experimentally and decide that Henry couldn't possibly have covered the ground so fast. All I can do is to take up a little of the margin which must exist in the time taken for any long walk. I think in this case ten minutes will be about right. Do you know anything about his watch? Shall I be able to get the case open easily?"

"I should think so. He's had it a long time and I've seen him operating on it himself with a penknife."

"Good—then there'll be old marks. It's the details that count—though after it's been underwater for a day or two it'll probably be all the same. There's just one more thing. How long will it take you to drive over to New Bridges?"

"Not more than half an hour."

"Don't take any chances. I should leave at nine. If you had a puncture or something and arrived late the whole plan would misfire, and if Henry plans to go off soon we might not have another opportunity."

"Any other last minute instructions?"

"Yes. Make sure Henry's wearing his panama—I know he almost always does but he's a bit erratic. Make sure he's got his watch on. Have some coffee at the hotel and try and get him to talk to the waiter or landlord or someone about the walk—just to establish that he was keen on it and if possible that he chose to start that end. You'll find they'll be quite interested. Be sure he gets cracking at the right time, otherwise it'll put the whole schedule out. When he has set



off, drive back to your house and wait for me there. I should be back soon after two. It'll be difficult for you, I know, but to-morrow you must put on a good act. Smile and be cheerful at the Hotel. Whatever you do, don't let them be able to say afterwards that there was anything strange in your attitude. Try and be quite normal with the maid when you get home. And with anybody else you happen to see. That's all—you've got an easy part really. And try to get some sleep to-night."

Denise finished her second drink. "Not much chance of that, I'm afraid."

She got up to go, and Trant took her in his arms. "I know we can pull this off," he said, cheerfully. "We've got to be tough for two or three days. I don't suppose a single suspicion will be aroused anywhere."

Denise clung to him and kissed him passionately. "I shall be glad when it's all over. I daren't let myself think."

"You don't have to," said Trant. "Apart from the panama and the watch, there's nothing at all for you to think about. Just let things take their course and I'll do the worrying. When I see you to-morrow afternoon, you'll be a rich woman in your own right—and free."

She kissed him again, without a word, and slipped off into the darkness.

## CHAPTER 11

THE atmosphere in the Wycherley household had never been pleasanter than it was the next morning as Denise and Henry made their preparations. It was a lovely day, and Henry whistled softly to himself as he dressed in his favourite old flannels and laced up his shoes. He had had a splendid night's sleep and felt fit and vigorous. He thoroughly enjoyed his egg and bacon, and drank several cups of coffee. The maid Betty packed lunch away in his rucksack and Henry tucked in the manuscript notes of his next chapter in case—as he said—he had to wait a long time for Trant at the Pool. When he was ready he sat out in the garden waiting for Denise. He was impatient to be off.

Denise had slept badly, as she had expected, but the morning air was exhilarating and her skin tingled with excitement. Nothing she had ever seen at the pictures would be more dramatic than what was going to happen to-day. She had no last-minute doubts or qualms—her whole attention was concentrated on carrying out her part of the plan without a mistake. She made her face up carefully, put on one of her most charming summer frocks, and fastened a bright silk handkerchief round her hair to prevent it getting into her eyes as she drove. Then she got out the Lanchester, checked over the tyres and petrol level and started the engine.

"Ready, Henry," she called. He got up from the lawn, his rucksack slung over one shoulder, clutching his long stick. He was wearing his panama hat, and his watch was on his wrist.

"What a heavenly day," he said, taking his place beside her. "It's good to be alive."

Denise smiled sweetly. "We'll have a nice drive," she said.

She knew by heart the winding cross-country roads to Moretonhampstead and the little Lanchester purred along between lush fields and hedgerows laced with honeysuckle. She didn't feel at all like the accomplice of a murderer-to-be; what she was doing was so ordinary and harmless and pleasant. Surely, whatever happened, she could never be blamed simply for taking her husband for an early morning drive.

Beyond Moretonhampstead she turned west and drove quickly along the straight road of long steep hills which is the main traffic artery through Dartmoor. The sun was getting up quickly and it was comfortably warm with the sunshine roof open. Henry kept looking to right and left, enjoying the vista of unbroken moorland on either side and occasionally glancing at his map to refresh his memory about the name of an obscure tor. His eyes were shining. He was in his element.

A run of fifteen minutes brought them to the picturesque cross-roads called New Bridges. Denise glanced at her watch. "We've half an hour to spare," she said. "Let's go and have a cup of coffee at the hotel. I didn't have much breakfast."

Always amenable, Henry said it was a good idea. Denise parked the car outside the entrance and they went into the breakfast room. Henry knew the hotel well—he'd often had lunch and drinks here during his moorland walks—and he made for an empty table by the window. Denise ordered coffee and biscuits.

They had been sitting only a few minutes when a big man in rather striking plus fours came walking through the room and caught sight of Henry. At once a smile lit up his round red face and he rushed across with his hand outstretched.

"Well, Mr. Wycherley, we don't often see you here at this early hour. How are you keeping?"

"Splendid, thank you," said Henry. "My dear, this is Mr. Crutch—he helps to run the hotel. We've had many a pleasant pint of ale together, haven't we, Sam? Sam, this is my wife."

Mr. Crutch again shook hands. "My boy's interested in butterflies," he confided to her. "That's how me and Mr. Wycherley first got to know each other. Are you both off for a day's walk?"

"No," said Denise. "Just Henry. He's walking for a wager."

"You don't say!" said Mr. Crutch.

"It's true enough," said Henry. "You remember an air force officer who parachuted down on the moors a few months back—a man named Trant? Well, we're having a walking race to Cranmere Pool. Fifty guineas a side, and the proceeds to the Cottage Hospital at Okecombe."

"I say, that's quite a local event—pity you didn't tell people about it. We'd have given you a great send-off. I'd like to come with you as pace-maker."

"Oh, I don't think that would be regarded as fair," said Denise quickly.

Crutch laughed. "I couldn't, anyway—we're rather busy just now. But where's Trant?"

"He's starting from the other side," said Henry.

"Mr. Trant was the challenger, so Henry was given choice of sides," said Denise.

"Ah, I see. All I can say is he'll need to be good if he can walk to Cranmere Pool quicker than you can. Does he know the moors?"

"Hardly at all," said Henry. "I feel it's like taking money from a child, but as the proceeds will go to charity I suppose it doesn't matter."

"He must have plenty of guineas to throw about," said Mr. Crutch. "What time's the marathon starting?"

"Ten o'clock," said Denise. She looked at her watch. "I make it five to. We'd better go outside."

Mr. Crutch looked at his watch. "Five to, yes. To the second! Wonderful thing, the time signal!"

Henry looked at his watch. "Dear me," he said. "My watch has stopped. What a nuisance!"

Denise's heart missed a beat. She put down her coffee cup with a jerk. "Oh, Henry, you are so careless. You must have forgotten to wind it."

"No, I didn't," said Henry. "I wound it fully last night when I went to bed—I must have overwound it. See, it stopped at ten past eleven." He shook it vigorously. Crutch took it and shook it, too.

"It's no good," he said, "you must have strained it."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Henry, putting it back on his wrist.

"Trant will have the time when I meet him. I say, we must be going."

"Wait a minute," said Denise. She felt that something was going wrong. She knew she ought to be very cool and think very clearly but she couldn't. There wasn't time. Henry was getting up. She knew the watch was terribly important, but Trant was going to stop it anyway and alter the hands, so the fact that it had stopped now couldn't matter much."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to take my watch," she said, not at all sure that she was doing the right thing. The watch was new and guaranteed waterproof.

"No, really," said Henry. "I shan't need it."

Denise followed him out into the road. So did Mr. Crutch. She tried not to be agitated, but she was. Her brain wouldn't clear—she felt the blood pulsing in her temples. She couldn't think. Suddenly she felt very frightened. "Henry, darling," she said, "are you sure you ought to do this walk? I'm afraid it will tire you so!"

Henry looked at her in surprise. "You ought to know me better than that, my dear. I've never felt fitter in my life. I say, I must be off."

"Yes," said Mr. Crutch, "there are fifteen seconds to go. Best of luck—I'll be glad to hear the result. Drop in again before long."

"You'll read about it in the paper," Henry called cheerfully. "Goodbye, my dear—mind how you drive home. We'll be back in good time for tea." He waved his stick, pushed open a gate, and ambled quickly up a field alongside a stone wall.

"Nice fellow," said Mr. Crutch, "one of the best, if you'll forgive my saying so. Well, I must be getting on with my work."

"Goodbye," said Denise. She felt constrained and anything but happy. She got hurriedly into the car and drove off.

A couple of hundred yards up the road, she stopped and looked back across the fields. Henry was making good progress. He had climbed a stile and was breasting the first slope with quick even strides. He didn't look back.

Denise watched him, fascinated. The decision was made, now—it was too late to alter anything. She couldn't get him back even if she wanted to. She could never have caught him up. He didn't know it, but he was going to die. She shivered. She would have hated to die herself. She wanted to live. Her nerves were taut as she watched the frail determined figure getting smaller and smaller on the slope. But she had no pity for him.

She was still worried about the watch. No one but Henry would have been so absent-minded as to wear a watch all morning without noticing that it had stopped. But it would be all right. Charles would make it all right.

She drove home slowly, fretting. Something was still nagging at her brain. She felt she had made a mistake but she couldn't think what.

. . . . .

Trant, too, had been up early that morning, making his preparations. Like the man whom he and Denise had condemned, he ate a hearty breakfast and felt in the best of spirits. After breakfast, he packed his rucksack with care. First, his lunch; then some whiskey; then a big wad of cotton wool soaked in chloroform and wrapped up in a piece of oilcloth.

At twenty minutes to ten he locked up the cottage and left his bicycle leaning against the wall at the back. Then he strolled along the hundred yards of curving lane to the 'Rod and Line', called his friend the landlord and suggested that they should go fishing together the following afternoon. Fred Barlow, the landlord, thought it was a good idea. They chatted about piscatorial matters for a few minutes and then Trant excused himself, explaining briefly about the wager. He promised to call in later that evening and tell Fred the result of it. At three minutes to ten by the clock in the bar, he left for 'Rosemary Cottage'. He had slung a pair of field glasses over his shoulder,

and from the back of the house he carefully surveyed the hill leading to the main road and the road itself. Having assured himself that there was no human being in sight anywhere he put on his rucksack, climbed on to his bicycle with his stick clutched rather perilously against the handlebar, and set off. He noticed with satisfaction that the surface of the road had dried out in the sun during the past few days, and that there would be no obviously fresh tyre tracks.

The great adventure had begun!

He seemed to reach the main road in a flash. There was still no sign of anyone about. It was the work of a moment to carry the bicycle behind the hedge and bury it under the pile of hay which he had marked down a few days before as a suitable hiding place. Treading as far as possible on wisps of hay in order to avoid leaving any footprints, he reached the road. It was two minutes past ten.

Everything was now plain sailing for the time being. He had no longer any need to be furtive, and pushed forward at his best pace across the two fields to the river. The very slight stiffness in his leg wore off as he walked, and he knew that he was making a better pace than he had made on his previous journeys.

He didn't think at all about the unpleasant work ahead. He concentrated solely upon the immediate problem of picking up landmarks.

About twenty minutes after he'd started, he passed a shepherd on the hillside. The man touched his forelock and Trant nodded and said "Good morning." It was an unusual but harmless encounter. Everything was in order.

The ground was a little dryer than it had been a couple of days before and to that extent the going was easier. Trant was only sub-consciously aware of the beauty of the day. He knew that he felt fit and tireless, but he had no eyes for the purple of the heather or the chasing shadows of the fleecy white clouds.

Every fifteen minutes or so, he checked his time. When he reached the spot where he had to scramble up the boulders of the river-bed, he was nearly five minutes ahead of schedule.

At ten minutes past eleven he was striding through the waste of black peat leading up to the Pool. The little sticks he had pushed into the ground to mark the path were still quite visible, and served their purpose admirably. Not for the first time, Trant congratulated himself on the perfection of his arrangements.

At eleven-fifteen he reached the edge of the Pool. He smiled to himself grimly. He had won the race. Now he had to be more careful. His story would be that he had waited here for an hour and a half, having lunch to fill in the time when Henry didn't turn up, and that then he had gone home again. Whatever he did from now on, on Henry's side of the Pool, he must leave no traces.

He swept the moors around him with his glasses. They sloped away in all directions and nowhere could he see any sign of human life. He began to move cautiously but rapidly down the slope in the direction of the mire. To avoid leaving any tracks, he descended

down the bed of a small beck, walking only on the stones. At eleven twenty three he saw Henry, about a quarter of a mile below him and walking swiftly towards the mires with his eyes on the ground. At eleven twenty eight Henry looked up, saw Trant, and stopped. He was less than a hundred yards from the mire which was to be his grave.

Trant, still stepping carefully from stone to stone, approached him, smiling. "You see," he called out as soon as he was within hailing distance, "I beat you to it."

Henry smiled back, sheepishly and obviously nonplussed. "For the life of me," he said, "I can't imagine how you did it."

"I found a new route," said Trant. "Magnificent. Smooth and dry ground almost all the way. Come and sit down under this rock and I'll show you on the map."

"It's unbelievable," said Henry. "You must have the agility of a mountain goat."

They sat down. Trant fished in his rucksack. "I can't find the map—ah, here it is," he said. He slipped the oilcloth from the cottonwool and with a quick unexpected movement he thrust the cottonwool against Henry's face and held it there. It was child's play. Henry gave a few feeble kicks and lost consciousness.

His pince-nez fell off and Trant pushed them deep down into the soft ground.

Now Trant took another careful look through his glasses at the surrounding moors. If anyone were to see him at this stage of the proceedings it would be literally fatal. But there was no movement anywhere except by a few nibbling sheep.

Trant picked up Henry and slung him over his shoulder. Still choosing his path among the stones, he crossed the hundred yards of ground which led to the mire. It was a brilliant green bed at the foot of a jutting rock. It was, Trant knew, only a few feet deep. As he looked at it there was a gurgle on the surface and a bubble of air was blown out and burst in a green scum.

Trant's sleeves were rolled up and his stockings rolled down. He knelt beside the mire and felt his knees squelch into the muck. Now he had the only really unpleasant part of the job before him. He had realized that he could not kill Henry and then push his body in the mire. Some interfering fool of a doctor would be bound to examine the corpse and announce that there was no water in the lungs and that he'd therefore been dead before he went into the mire. No, Henry had to go into that green smelling bed alive—and conscious!

Trant placed the unconscious figure so that the head was over the mire, and waited. He had to wait a full minute before his victim started to come round. At last Henry sighed and stirred and then suddenly began to struggle.

Trant set his teeth and pushed Henry's head down through the green scum.

Henry's legs thrashed a little but he had no chance. Trant's great weight pressed down on him and an iron grip kept his head below the

surface. There was a smothered choking sound, some more bubbles, a dreadful heaving of shoulders and then silence. The job was done.

Trant sat back. It had been an even nastier undertaking than he had expected. He took a quick mouthful of whiskey from the bottle he'd brought with him and felt better.

There was still a lot to do. First, the watch. He unfastened it from Henry's wrist and looked at it. The hands pointed to ten minutes past eleven. His own watch showed twenty to twelve.

Henry's watch must have stopped during his walk! Just like him to forget to wind it! Anyway, it didn't matter. Trant quickly eased the strap and opened the back of the case with his knife. He let one or two drops of dirty water run from the tip of his finger into the works and snapped the case shut again. Then, cautiously, he set the hands to eleven eighteen, ten minutes before the actual time of his meeting with Henry.

Now he had to get Henry's sprawling body into the mire. He rolled it over on to the quaking jelly of mud and it gradually settled down. Trant pushed the arm with the watch on it down into the mire; the other arm he held above the surface. Little by little, with hideous sucking noises and the release of dank unpleasant odours, the body disappeared. Trant had chosen his spot well. Presently it came to rest, with Henry's right hand and a bit of coat sleeve protruding through the scum.

Trant surveyed his handiwork with satisfaction. He had had to use hardly any violence and he felt sure there would be no marks on the body which couldn't be accounted for by the wild struggles of a man trapped in a bog. Henry was a little near the edge, considering that he was supposed to have fallen in from the rock above, but that also could be readily explained by his frantic flounderings to reach the bank. The outstretched hand, Trant decided, was quite an effective artistic touch. It looked most natural—and who, after all would murder a man and leave his hand sticking out of a mire?

Trant once more inspected the moors through his glasses. They were still quite deserted. He walked back to the place where he had sat with Henry under the rock and picked up all the odd belongings that he'd left there. Henry's rucksack, of course, had remained on his back all the time and had gone down with him into the mire. Trant pushed Henry's long stick a little way into the mud near the body, using a handkerchief in case by any chance it should take fingerprints. The panama hat he smeared with mud and threw out on to the green surface of the mire, where it rested conspicuously. Henry, and all his effects, had now been disposed of.

The edge of the mire looked a bit disturbed where Trant had knelt and Henry's body had lain. Trant used the end of his stick to obliterate the marks of his knees. It wasn't a wholly satisfactory job when he had finished, but there was nothing which definitely indicated that a second man had been there and certainly nothing to point to himself.

Trant, rucksack on back and stick in hand, now returned once again over the ground he had covered, searching minutely for a stray

footmark which might give him away. There were none at all except near the mire, and these he skilfully obliterated with his stick. He treated one or two of Henry's in the same way. When he had finished, he felt convinced that there were no tell-tale signs of any importance. If the various marks on the ground told any story at all, it was an incoherent one. Besides, whoever found Henry wouldn't first look around for footmarks. People would trample around the mire like a herd of buffaloes. Even if there were ever a police investigation, which was most unlikely, it wouldn't happen until the trail was old and cold.

There were still one or two things to be done. Trant was in a filthy condition, with the mud of the mire all over his boots, legs, arms and face. He found a fast-running beck and carefully washed himself in the cool refreshing water, drying off quickly in the sun. The mud on his stockings and shorts would cake and could be rubbed off later. He washed the muddy end of his stick. Then, after a last look round, he made his way back to Cranmere Pool as quickly as he could and ate his lunch. He had developed a healthy appetite and ate with relish. After lunch he took the chloroformed cotton waste and the oilskin and pushed them far down into the soggy ground in two different places. He emptied out the rucksack and exposed it to the sun and air in the hope that the faint smell of chloroform would disperse. In any case, he could always say if necessary that he had recently carried Henry's butterfly-killing bottle during a walk together.

The time was now one o'clock, and theoretically he had spent about an hour and a half at the Pool waiting for Henry. As far as he could see, everything had gone according to plan. He set off back, walking almost as fast as he had come. As he made his way through the black peat field for the last time, he drew out the sticks with which he had marked the winding track among the hummocks. A mile further on, he pushed the whole bunch down into the soft earth.

He felt extremely cheerful. It hadn't been very enjoyable, but it had been necessary and the future was bright. Now he could let his mind wander from the work of the day—now he could allow his thoughts to dwell on carefree prospects. He whistled a tune as he strode ahead. When he came to the stretch of river bed that he had to descend, he jumped from boulder to boulder. He had nearly reached the bottom when he suddenly landed on a loose one. It tilted over, his right leg got jammed between it and another boulder, and he fell heavily and awkwardly.

Cursing, he straightened himself out. His leg hurt abominably and he rolled down his stocking. He saw that his old wound had partially opened and the flesh around it was contused and angry.

His first thought was how this would affect the whole picture of the day's events. A few moments' reflection convinced him that it would make no difference. It didn't alter his story in the least. But it was certainly the damndest nuisance.



He had still about half a mile to go to the main road, and it was going to be extremely difficult. He bound up the leg with his handkerchief, pulled up his stocking, and made his way down very slowly and with great pain, leaning hard on his stick. He reached the gate leading into the road only by the exercise of much will-power and stopped there to rest. He felt faint and sick.

As he leaned over the gate a boy emerged from behind the haystack. He was a small boy with a shock of red hair, and he was trying to ride Trant's bicycle.

## CHAPTER 12

TRANT knew that he had to think fast. This little red-headed urchin, with a shrunken cap on the back of his head and the face of a rather grubby cherub, might look innocent enough, but he had the power to cause an awful lot of trouble. How the devil he'd come to find the bicycle was beside the point. He'd found it, and the urgent question now was, what to do about it?

The bicycle played an important part in the alibi. It was therefore absolutely essential to conceal the fact that it had been used. Once its presence was revealed, it would be obvious that an attempt had been made to construct an alibi. And that would be damning. Since so much in this case might turn on timing, the revelation that Trant had deliberately tried to cut his time by six minutes and hide the fact would almost amount to a confession of guilt.

What was he to do right now? Should he pretend that the bicycle was nothing whatever to do with him? The boy probably didn't know whose bike it was and would almost certainly return it in due course to its hiding place. But afterwards he might talk. You never knew with little boys. He might boast about his prank to other boys. If the police ever got interested in Trant's schedule, they might start enquiring about bicycles. They might hear about this one, and from the description they would soon identify it as Trant's. How could he stop the little boy talking?

Trant looked around sombrely for the umpteenth time that day. He seemed to be alone with the boy. He could easily strangle him and stuff his body into the haystack. He had no scruples—but would it be wise? The disappearance of a small boy from the district wouldn't help to convince the authorities that Henry had met with a simple accident. The coincidence would be bound to strike someone in this normally law-abiding district. Besides, the boy's mother might know where he'd gone to play—and if they searched around here they might find his body.

Trant's leg pained him abominably. He would almost have enjoyed strangling the young brat. But he made an effort to control himself and beckoned the boy over.

"What's your name, sonny?"

The boy had a bold unabashed look. "Douglas," he said.

"Douglas what?"

"Douglas McCabe." He looked about ten years old: his face was freckled and his expression cheeky. Trant felt out of his depth.

"Well, Douglas, you may not realize it but you're riding my bicycle."

The youth had the grace to blush. "I didn't know it was yours, sir."

"You knew it wasn't your own. Riding other people's bicycles is against the law. I could take you to the police station for this."

"I'll put it back, sir—I won't do it again, I promise."

"How did you come to find it?"

"I was walking along by the hedge. Tommy Jones said there was a hedgehog's nest near here. I was poking things with a stick and I fell over the bicycle." The boy was regaining his nerve. "I thought someone had lost it. I was going to take it back."

"Back where to?"

Douglas thought quickly. "Back to the police station," he said.

Trant looked very severe. "I believe you were trying to steal it."

"Oh, no sir, I wasn't. Honest I wasn't."

"I think you were. However, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt this time. But it certainly looked as though you were stealing it. If I were you, I shouldn't mention to anyone that you so much as saw a bicycle—not even to another boy. If you do, the police may hear about it and you'll probably be sent to prison. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Here's sixpence to spend. Don't tell your mother where you got it."

Douglas grinned. "No fear," he said.

"You can put the bicycle back where you found it, and run along."

. . . . .

Trant toiled on up the hill, leaning hard on his stick and stopping every few yards to rest. Blasted kid! Everything seemed suddenly to have gone wrong—first his leg, and now this. He didn't feel at all happy about the way he'd handled the child. Perhaps he should have frightened him more—or perhaps bribed him more. He hadn't done either very thoroughly. He must think of some story to explain away the bicycle in case of need—any story, however lame, would be better than nothing if the police got around to asking questions. Suppose he said, if challenged, that he'd put the bicycle there earlier for use on the way back? Hell, no—he couldn't possibly have planned to cycle back up the hill. But he could have been going over to the Wycherleys—that would explain it. He could say that he had brought the bicycle down to save him a walk of a mile to the Wycherleys after a long day on the moors. It wasn't very convincing—he would surely have wanted to go and wash, first, and change his clothes, seeing that his cottage was only half a mile away. But at least it covered the facts.

It took him a full fifteen minutes to reach 'Rosemary Cottage'. His leg was very swollen and hurting more than ever. It looked as

though he would be laid up for some time. Obviously, he would have to get Doctor Parsons along to see to it. But first, he must ring Denise.

He put the call through. When the receiver clicked the other end he said at once: "This is Trant. Is that you, Denise? Good. Look, something's happened. I think you'd better come over to the cottage right away." And he hung up. He didn't want to talk on the telephone.

A few minutes later he heard a car climbing the hill. It stopped, and there were swift footsteps on the path. Denise came in with a rush, pale but lovely. She threw herself down by the divan, where Trant was lying with his leg up. "What's happened?" she asked quickly. "Tell me. Is Henry . . . ?"

"Shut the door," Trant snapped. "Henry won't bother us any more. He's dead. The job's done."

Denise sank down. "So that's that. What have you done to your leg?"

"I fell," said Trant irritably. "I came rushing down a river bed like a thoughtless idiot and trod on a loose boulder. I'm afraid it's rather bad."

Denise examined the wound with a semi-professional eye. "It's a nasty mess. You'll have to lie up for weeks. Does it hurt much?"

"Like hell!"

"I'll bathe it." She got a bowl of water and a towel. Trant told her where she could find a bandage and she bound it up.

"It's been a frightful morning," she said. "I thought the telephone would never ring. Did the plan work smoothly?"

"No," said Trant grimly. "Everything was all right—apart from the leg—till I got to the main road and then I found a boy playing with my bicycle. Do you know him? Says his name's Douglas McCabe?"

"There's a Mrs. McCabe lives in another of Farmer Tolley's cottages about a mile along the Tavistock road. Her husband's a labourer. I know, because she does Colonel Fletcher's charring."

Trant groaned. "Worse and worse. The bicycle will take some explaining away if the boy chatters. I tried to frighten him a bit. It'll probably be all right. Did everything go smoothly your end?"

"Fairly," said Denise. "You noticed that Henry's watch had stopped?"

Trant stared at her. "What do you mean, for God's sake? It stopped at ten minutes past eleven. How could you know?"

"It stopped last night. Henry overwound it. I didn't know what to do. I only found out just before he was leaving."

"But . . ." Trant sat up. "This is serious, Denise. Does anybody else know?"

"Only that man at the Hotel—Crutch, or something. He tried to get it to go."

"You mean he saw what time it had stopped at?"

"Yes," said Denise faintly. "Why?"

Trant suddenly shouted at her. "You're a fool—a half-wit. Don't you see, there's evidence by a third person that Henry was carrying an overwound watch with the hands stopped at 11.10. At the present moment, those hands stand at 11.18. Will you kindly explain to me how they got altered if Henry met his death accidentally—and *alone*?"

"Yes—I see. Of course I see. I knew there was something. It's been worrying me all morning. Oh, God!" She sat motionless for a moment with her head in her hands. "But perhaps nobody will find out about the watch having stopped. There's no reason why Crutch should talk about it."

"He'll talk about it if the police start going around asking questions. The time is too important—they're bound to check up on clocks and watches all along the line. And he'll read all the details in the local paper—he's bound to think it's odd. The police will find out that someone altered those hands on the moor. They'll know it was murder and they'll look for someone who was on the moor at the same time. Who else was there but me?"

"Henry might have altered the hands himself. They couldn't prove he hadn't."

"Would a man hurrying to win a bet stop to fiddle with the hands of a watch which three people had already decided was overwound? Have some sense." His face looked grey. "You know, Denise, if we don't do something about this very quickly, we're sunk. Those watch hands have simply got to be back at 11.10 when the body's found."

"But that'll ruin your alibi. The time of death won't have been established. They'll estimate a likely time considering the way Henry was walking and then they'll probably decide that it was just possible for you to cover the ground. Or they might say that you'd met Henry at the Pool and persuaded him to go back to the mire."

"I know—but it can't be helped. The main thing, after all, is that they shouldn't suspect it wasn't an accident. As things stand, that watch is dynamite. I'm not sure the best thing wouldn't be to push the whole body down into the mire, with the hat and the stick. Then he'd never be found and there wouldn't be any case at all."

"There wouldn't be any money either," said Denise, "not for years and years. They'd be sure to find out that Henry was absent-minded and odd. They'd think he'd wandered off somewhere. They'd never believe he'd fallen in a mire if they didn't find the body. If we've had to commit a murder, at least let's get the benefit of it."

"I agree," said Trant. "But you know what all this means?"

"What?"

"Well, we'll have to report Henry's disappearance to-night—it'll look most fishy if we don't. That means they'll send out a search-party to-morrow morning. They can't fail to spot his panama pretty soon. So if we're going to be in time, one of us has to go back to the mire *right now* and set the hands of the watch back to 11.10."

Denise looked at Trant's leg. Her voice sank to a whisper. "*One of us!*"

"Exactly! With the best will in the world, I can't do it. *You'll* have to!"

"You're crazy," cried Denise, "Crazy! I can't possibly. I hate the moors—they frighten me. I don't know the way. I couldn't walk that far. I wouldn't be able to find the body. I should make a mistake—I know I should."

"Here—have a drink," said Trant. "Pull yourself together. Now, young woman, just get this clearly in your mind. If that watch is found in its present condition, you and I will hang. Both of us. Just let your mind dwell for a moment on that thought. The last night, alone in a cell—a call at daybreak—a man putting a noose round your lovely neck—the knot under your ear—then the jerk as you fall into space and your neck cracks! Pretty, isn't it?"

Denise covered her ears. "Don't, Charles, don't. I can't bear it. You said it would be easy. I'd never have agreed if I'd known."

Trant's jaw was like granite. "I'm sorry—it shouldn't have been like this, but things went wrong. Now you've got to put them right—for your own sake."

Denise rocked and moaned. "But I can't—I just *can't*."

"You've got to. You don't know what you can do until you try. You're a soft, spoiled young woman, but you're perfectly healthy and quite capable of doing eight miles over the moors. You'll be worn out when you come back, but what the hell? I'll give you detailed written instructions about the route—I know it like the back of my hand. You'll have no difficulty in finding the body if you go right away—it's not four o'clock yet and you'll have at least six hours of daylight."

"Suppose I'm seen on the moors? I never go there—everyone knows I loathe the place. I'll be horribly conspicuous."

"You'll be a loving wife worried to death about her missing husband. If anyone finds out, it'll strengthen your position—provided you're not seen near the body, and there's not a chance of that late in the afternoon."

"Oh, Charles, I'm sure I'll get lost. I'll never find the place and I shall wander about all night on the moors. I shall go mad—I can't stand it."

Trant went on hammering away. "I'll make it so easy that even you can't go wrong," he said. "I'll divide the route up into stages and explain each stage. I'll give you a word picture of the whole course. I'll describe every tree, every wall, every boulder almost. I can see it all in my mind like a photograph."

"What about the body? It'll be horrible. I shan't be able to stand it. I've never seen a dead man."

"It'll be horrible to fall six feet with a rope round your neck," said Charles brutally. "Remember that, all the time you're on the moor. You just can't afford the luxury of being feminine. Try not to think about what you're doing—just do it. Come, Denise, there's no time to lose. You'd better get along to the house and put on some old clothes. Then drive back here. Don't be long—I'll have everything

ready for you. Oh, and take this bottle of chloroform back with you and put it in Henry's room. We must try and clear up as we go along."

Denise got up reluctantly. "I still don't think I can do it. You said the hand with the watch on it was down in the mire. How on earth shall I get it up? I shall probably fall in myself."

"No, you won't—there's a fairly firm edge. You'll have to pull and heave a bit, and he'll come up. You'll get absolutely filthy, of course, but it can't be helped. Now hurry!"

Denise went off with a white set face. She was back in just under three-quarters of an hour, dressed in breeches, long stockings, heavy shoes and a waterproof jacket with a zipp fastener. On her head was a brown beret.

"Good," said Trant. "Nice camouflage. Now listen very carefully. Here's the plan of the route I've drawn for you. I've put in all the landmarks I can remember—gates, trees, shepherds' huts, gaps in stone walls. You'll find the ground very wet in parts, but there are no mires this side of the Pool—it'll be uncomfortable but quite safe. Here are my binoculars—when you get a few hundred yards past the Pool, you'll be able to spot Henry's hat. There's a difficult peaty stretch before you get to the Pool. I marked the path with sticks, but I took them out. If you look very hard, you may be able to find the little holes that the sticks made. If not, you'll have to find your way through as best you can."

Denise nodded. She had at last reconciled herself to the fact that she had to go, and was listening intently.

"When you get beyond the Pool, be very careful about footprints. Try and keep to the stones and boulders—they're scattered all around. If you make a footmark, stop and scratch it out behind you. You're bound to make some marks round the mire. Rub those out before you leave. That's very important, because your shoes are small and a mark would be easily recognized as a woman's."

"I'll do my best."

"Good girl! Here's my rucksack. I've packed some food in it, and some brandy. There's also a knife and a torch—just in case you do get lost! I've put in a small coil of rope—it might help you to get the body up—and a bit of sacking to kneel on. Don't, for heaven's sake, leave anything behind. If you leave anything or drop anything—knife or torch or rope or anything—we're finished. Take a good look round when you're through, and make sure the place is exactly as you found it."

Again Denise nodded.

"Don't make any mistake with the watch. All you have to do is to set the hands back to 11.10. Don't worry if the body isn't quite in the same position when you've finished with it but be sure that something is sticking out and that the head and watch are underneath. When you've finished, wash yourself as best you can in one of the streams. If you happen to see anyone, which is most unlikely, give him a wide berth. Be sure there's no one about when you're actually on the job. I think that's all. When you come back, pick up your

car at the bottom of the hill and drive straight home. What about the maid?"

"It's her evening off. I've told her I don't want her any more to-day and she's gone into Exeter. She won't be back till late."

"That's fine. When you get home, take off all your dirty clothes and hide them away somewhere. We'll have to deal with those later. Then come up here, and we'll decide what to do next."

"I shall be dead," said Denise.

"You'll be dead if you make a mistake. If you can pull this off I believe we shall be all right. It's up to you." He kissed her, but without passion. "Good luck."

Denise went to the door. "It's beginning to cloud over," she said. "I believe it's going to rain."

"All the more reason to hurry."

He listened to the car as it ran gently down the hill. He heard Denise parking it behind the hedge. Then he hobbled out to the back of the cottage and watched her go through the gate and across the first two fields. She was walking fast and resolutely. He saw her strike up the hill and turn to the right along the sheep-track he had found. Then she disappeared round the shoulder.

Inside the cottage, he began laboriously to clean the clothes he had worn during the day. The shoes were all right—he had washed the mire off them in the stream on the moor, and they would be dirty anyway. His stockings, shirt and shorts were thickly spattered with black mud and all these he washed in the tin bath. Then he lighted a wood fire in the big grate and hung them in front of it to dry. By his reckoning, it would be several days before anyone became interested in such details, at the very worst, and by then all his things would be dry and clean and would give nothing away. He must remember to move them from the fire before the doctor came.

He poured himself a stiff tot of whisky and returned to the divan. His leg felt as though it were on fire—all this walking wasn't doing it any good. The next few hours would be trying. Denise, he knew, might fail. It was a tough assignment for a man, let alone a woman. Only the most desperate danger would have justified such a step. But, as he reviewed the situation, he felt that he had been right. There had been no alternative.

If she succeeded, where would they be? The search-party would go out to-morrow and find the body. In the meantime, Trant would have told his story. The police would have no reason to disbelieve it. There would be an inquest and the verdict would be "Death by misadventure." The body would be buried and that would be the end of that. It was still quite possible that in a few days all their troubles would be over.

If she failed—well, everything would be over. Once suspicions were aroused, there would be questions without end—or rather, with one very definite and certain end. For if Henry had been murdered, no one could have done it but Trant. Proving it might be more difficult, but Trant had no intention of risking a trial. He still had his

service revolver—if the necessity arose, he wouldn't hesitate to use it. It would be tough on Denise—he couldn't quite see her taking that way out. But that would be her problem.

## CHAPTER 13

ONCE embarked on her grim and difficult errand, Denise decided to make the best of it and to get it over as quickly as possible. She had always been single-minded in her aims and able to concentrate on one thing at a time. Now she was concentrating on carrying out Trant's instructions. She had developed a considerable respect for his foresight and cleverness, and could not distrust his judgment. And he had been sure that this journey was necessary.

The thing that worried her most of all just now was the weather. The wind had veered to the south-west and what had been fleecy clouds in the morning were now acquiring dark threatening centres and frequently blotting out the sun. Every time the sun went in, Denise felt her heart sink. At once the moors became blacker and gloomier, a vast brooding expanse of heather and swamp through which she had to make her solitary way. But directly the clouds passed, her spirits rose again. She prayed that the rain would hold off. If it didn't she knew there would be real hardships on the top of the moors. At all costs she must get back to the road before dusk.

Although she had always kept away from the moors, Trant had been quite right when he said that they would present no insuperable difficulty. She was tall and strong for a woman, and she swung forward from the hips on every stretch of level ground at a pace which he would have been gratified to see. She would certainly feel very tired to-night, and unbearably stiff to-morrow but the walking part of the journey was far from unendurable. As a walker, she had been lazy rather than incapable. She simply preferred riding in motor cars.

Every few minutes she stopped and consulted Trant's map and notes. They were remarkably detailed. "After going through the blue gate with the words 'Please shut the gate' on it," he had written, "you will see a hole in a stone wall straight ahead of you. Make for this and go through it. On your left you will see another stone wall with a clump of trees behind it. Walk along the lower side of this wall till it takes a right-angled turn up the hill. About one hundred paces half left, you will see a single tree. Go to this. A quarter of a mile further on you will reach a small stream running through wet ground. Follow this stream upwards until it forks. Then take the right-hand fork . . ." and so on. It was true what Trant had said. He had made this ground his own and after three days' study had a photographic recollection of every detail. It was better than all the guide-books. As long as she kept to his instructions, she could hardly go wrong.



Steady progress, and success in finding each new landmark, gave her confidence. If she had missed a single key point in the route, it would have been a different story. She would have had to go back searching for it, she would have lost time and soon perhaps hope as well. But already, as she looked back, she could see the substantial distance she had covered and though the way ahead looked steep and hard her morale was high. She even began to feel elated at her competence. Trant would praise her when she returned; if they pulled through all right, it would be half her doing. Several times, when she paused to take breath, she carefully searched the horizon for moving figures as Trant had done before her, but there was now less likelihood of company on the moor than there had ever been. The afternoon weather was not promising enough to bring out walkers.

Soon she was climbing up the river bed among the boulders. It was somewhere here that Trant had slipped and in his instructions he had written 'Beware of loose stones!!!' with three exclamation marks. She climbed carefully up the boulders and was amazed how quickly she gained height. She studied her notes. "Climb till you reach a waterfall where the stream drops about four feet over a large boulder. The ground on the right is now flat and very wet but safe. Turn right at right angles to the stream and you will see on the horizon about three-quarters of a mile away a definite pimple of ground. Go straight for it and to hell with the marsh." Trant's strong vivid personality seemed to go with her as she boldly struck through the swamp. It was horribly uncomfortable. "Walk on the tufts of grass" he had written. She tried to, but often her feet slid down into the little pools of brackish ice-cold water. Her shoes filled and became soggy and heavy. The going was now much harder but she plodded ahead. She promised herself that when she reached the pimple she would have a little drop of brandy. She would have earned it. This was one of the longest three-quarters of a mile she could remember, but she struggled up the last slope and reached the jutting piece of hill. It was six o'clock, but the midsummer sun was still high and there were occasional gaps in the clouds. She decided that things could have been a lot worse.

The brandy gave her new encouragement and she needed it for what lay ahead. Before her was the whole expanse of black broken peat and when the shadows were on it it looked like a pit which would swallow her up. Trant had told her to make for a shepherd's hut, and she could see it in the distance. She soon found, however, that it was impossible to follow his track through the peatfield. Only once did she spot a little square hole in the spongy surface of the peat. Repeatedly she came to deep breaks in the ground with nothing but black water ahead and had to retrace her steps for a dozen yards and find a way around. Once or twice she began to think she would never get through this maze. But the shepherd's hut beckoned her and little by little she came nearer to it. When she finally reached it, she rested again.

It was cold, now, for she was nearly a thousand feet up and she was glad of the wind-proof jacket. The wind blew strongly, sighing and roaring and dying away. It was a depressing sound and put thoughts into her head which were better not there. Nor could she bear the silence in the moments of lull. Up here among the nibbling sheep and the stirring moorland grass and the vast expanse of grey sky it was inexpressibly lonely. She got up and pushed on.

Now she was almost on the last lap. Before her lay the dark waters of the Pool and beyond it the slope down to the mire. She made another quarter of a mile and the ground opened out in front of her. She put Trant's binoculars to her eyes and swept the country round.

Almost at once she spotted Henry's hat—a white speck lying on the mire near a big rock.

She made her way towards it, more slowly now because, following Trant's instructions, she was keeping to the stones. Her feet seemed heavy and reluctant. She was filled with loathing of the task before her and her heart beat rapidly as she approached the mire. Ten yards away she stopped dead. She had seen the hand sticking through the green scum. It was black, revolting, with horribly crooked fingers. A fit of nausea swept over her and she sat down on a stone with her head between her knees.

The wave of faintness passed and left her feeling cold, with a dew of perspiration above her temples. She pulled herself together. She could not fail now that she had come all this way—now that her object was so nearly accomplished. Cautiously she approached the mire and worked her way round between it and the rock.

She opened her rucksack and took a big gulp of brandy. She mustn't think—it would be fatal to think. The recollection passed through her mind that only twelve hours ago the man whose choked body was now engulfed in black oozing mud was sleeping peacefully in a bed a few feet away from her. She clenched her teeth and put the thought away. Her face was distorted by the effort of concentration. She no longer was aware of anything around her but the hand and what she had to do.

She grasped the slimy fingers. They were cold and stiff, and bent as they were into a crook they offered a grip. Kneeling on the sacking she had brought, she heaved and strained. The arm began to come up out of the mire, making gurgling noises. It was like drawing a cork out of a champagne bottle. At first the body moved slowly, almost imperceptibly. Then, under steady pressure, it started to ooze out quite fast. When the shoulder was above the surface, Denise rested. Her breath was coming in short spasmodic jerks and her heart was beating as though she'd run a mile. Every now and again she gave a sob that shook her whole frame. Her clothes were already covered with slime.

A few spots of rain fell, but she didn't feel them. She had seen the strap of the rucksack over Henry's shoulder and that gave her an idea. Taking the rope that Trant had provided her with, she

slipped it under the strap, stood up, and began to pull. She felt that the body was coming—coming. Suddenly it shot out of the mire with a great squelching plop. It turned over on its side and faced her. She gave an uncontrollable scream. The face was black with a strand of green weed across it, and the eyes were half open and staring at her through their slits of lids. The whole body was stiff.

Now Denise could reach the wrist with the watch on it, but to move the hands of the watch was a very different matter. The wrist was bent back over the winding knob so that it was impossible to turn it. She would have to take the watch off.

This wasn't easy, either. In the mire, the strap had become soaked and had shrunk until it was pressing tightly into the flesh. Denise struggled with it for several minutes, tugging at the buckle. Suddenly it came loose, and the watch dropped into the mire. Desperately Denise plunged her hand after it, felt it, and clutched it. God, she had nearly ruined everything. She cleaned the watch and looked at the face. The hands pointed clearly to 11.18. She shook it to make sure that the works were really lifeless. Then, trembling in her eagerness and excitement, she put the hands to 11.10.

Suddenly she became conscious of the rain, which was beginning to fall heavily. She must hurry—she would have a hell of a journey home, and there was a lot to do yet. She noticed the white band on the wrist where the watch strap had kept the black mud away. She must see that the strap covered the same place, or she would be leaving more evidence that the body had been tampered with. Just as she was stretching for the wrist, the body slipped a little and she started back in terror. This nightmare would take twenty years off her life. When it stopped moving, she quickly fastened the strap round the wrist and heaved the sodden mass back into the mire. Slowly, with gruesome noises, it settled down. She began to push it with her stick. It was like kneading dough. The smell of the mire was frightful. The rain was soaking her. She pushed the watch arm down and it came up again. The body was turned on its face now and she pressed the stick against the rucksack. The head went down and so did the watch arm. The whole body was getting engulfed. It was being sucked in. Fearful lest it should be lost altogether she clutched one leg. In a few moments the remains of Henry came to rest again, with the leg sticking out of the mire from the knee to the foot. She had done her job.

She got up. Long dry sobs were still racking her. She wished she was dead, too. From head to foot she was covered in muck. Almost mechanically she gathered up her belongings—the sacking, the rope, the rucksack, the stick. She stirred up the footprints on the edge of the mire with the stick, took two steps on to a stone and again scratched out the prints. She couldn't believe that it mattered now—the rain was pouring down. By morning all traces would be gone. She stumbled over to a stream and cleansed her face and hands. Her clothes were beyond hope—all she could do was to scrape off the thickest of the mud with Trant's knife. Her feet were ice-cold. She

was beginning to get very wet. She took another gulp of brandy, and was immediately and violently sick.

As she struggled back to the shepherd's hut near the Pool, she knew a moment of black panic. Trant had given her instructions how to get here—had he also instructed her how to get back? She found her page of notes and turned it over. Yes, there they were. What a methodical cool mind he had. But she had been methodical too. She had done something that not one woman in ten thousand could have done. Mixed with her horror and acute discomfort, there was pride.

She had come through her ordeal. It had been dreadful, ghastly. At one moment—when the body slipped—she had thought that she could stand it no more. It had been so very dead, and yet so very human. But there it was, safely back in the mire, and all the danger was past. When Trant had talked about hanging, she had almost felt the rope at her throat. Now she could breathe again. In her nervous reaction she felt like laughing. Suddenly she did laugh. She laughed louder and louder, and the pitch of the laugh grew higher and higher and her whole body rocked and shook with the uncontrolled fury of wild hysteria. She threw herself on the turf, clutching the roots of the grass with her nails, tearing in dementia at the ground.

In a few moments the fit passed. She was crying quietly now, almost too weak to move. It was still raining. The wind was colder than ever. If she stayed here, she would die. Already, the sky seemed to be growing darker and the hillside more menacing. She felt hungry, and nibbled a sandwich. It tasted good, and she ate another. She no longer felt sick. She took a little more brandy and it warmed her and stayed inside her. She got up and began to descend the hill. It was easier going back, in one way—she remembered some of the landmarks. But others looked quite different in the reverse direction and she had to consult her paper. It was getting wet through, and the ink was running. If she looked at it very often in the rain it would become useless pulp.

It was no good bothering about getting wet any more. The weather was working up for a wild night. Her feet and stockings were soaked through and through and she could feel the water clammy against her legs and streaming down her neck. She would be an incredible sight by the time she got to the road.

Crossing the peat-field was a nightmare. The rain had made the peat slippery and twice she slid off the black hummocks into pools of water. She was so wet that if the pools were small she just went through them.

She could hardly believe that she, Denise, was doing this. The comfort-loving Denise! She tried to cheer herself by thinking of some of the high-lights in her past life—the good life, before that long and dreary war. The day in the restaurant at Jones & Nicholls, centuries ago, when she was wearing that lovely tea-gown and met William. The sensuous delights of her flat in Piccadilly. The sunny beauty of the Riviera.

No, that brought her back to Henry. Better to think now of the future—the safe, certain, golden future she had earned by her grim adventure to-day. A white yacht on blue quiet seas, with Charles beside her in spotless flannels and a smart peaked cap, and cocktails on deck. Olives and oranges and cloudless skies on the golden coast of California. They would visit the Painted Desert—she had always wanted to see Arizona. They would go to Buenos Aires. They would take the clipper to Honolulu. They would laze on warm wide beaches and go surf-riding in rolling breakers.

Ah, there was the gap in the stone wall. She was getting back to civilization. A few fields now, and she would reach the road. She must be very careful—it would never do to be seen in this condition. She rounded the shoulder of the hill, dropped down to the river and crossed by the stepping stones. She looked at her watch—it was nine o'clock and dusk was falling. She had got back just about in time. Another half-hour, and she would almost certainly have come to grief.

She could see the road now—the blessed road. She became conscious that her head was aching abominably and that all her limbs felt like lead. To-morrow, she would be a complete wreck. Another couple of hundred yards—that was all. She could see the haystack. Probably the bike was still there, but it would have to stay there till morning. There was no one about. No one *would* be about on a night like this.

She reached the car, unfastened her sodden rucksack and threw it in the back, then fell into the driver's seat. Not long now! The engine burst into sweet life at a touch of the starter. She backed out into the road, turned, and raced for home.

The house was quiet. The pouring rain screened everything. She went straight up to her own room, drew the curtains and switched on the light. In a moment she had all her clothes off. They reeked of mud and sweat. She went into the bathroom and switched on the electric water heater. While the bath was running she wrapped her muddy shoes, her stockings, breeches, jacket, beret and underclothes in a big bundle and cleared a space for it in the bottom of the wardrobe. They must wait till later. They would have to.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Glorious to be free of clothes. There were great red marks on her shoulders where the straps of the rucksack had pressed. Probably they would disappear in the bath—they certainly told their tale all right. She couldn't bear to look at her face. Her eyes were ringed with fatigue, her complexion was ivory. Her hair was tangled and wet where it had escaped from the beret, and there was mud on it.

She lay in the bath, luxuriating. The hot scented soapy water soothed her, made her sleepy. The nightmare was over. She had earned this—*earned* it. She had behaved well. She gave no more thought to Henry—she would probably dream about him, but she wouldn't think about him. The house was much nicer without him.

She stepped rosily from the bath. The marks on her shoulders had gone. She sat in a dressing gown in her room and arranged her hair. It was still a bit damp, but she had brushed it out and there were no traces of mud any more. She made up her face carefully and when that was done to her satisfaction she put on a dinner gown. She swallowed two aspirins and felt a new woman. She took up the telephone and called Trant. He answered immediately—said "Hello" sharply.

"It's me," said Denise.

"Thank God! Come round at once."

"Must I? I'm terribly tired."

"I'm sure you are, but I must talk to you."

"All right," said Denise. She put on a wrap and went out again to the car, taking the rucksack with her.

Trant was still lying on the divan and looked as though he'd hardly moved.

"Well?" he said.

Denise sank into a chair. "I did it. Everything. You should thank me."

"I do," said Trant. "You're a wonderful woman. Tell me."

"There's nothing to tell. I found the way—your directions were perfect. I did everything you said. I don't want to talk about it. I'm so tired I could sleep right here. It was just—horrible. Everything was horrible. I got covered in filth. I was ill. It rained all the way back."

"I heard it," said Trant. "We should be glad—it'll wash out every trace. Did you bring the things back?"

Denise wearily indicated the rucksack. "They're all there—knife, torch, rope, sacking, binoculars, everything. You'll have to deal with them—I can't do anything else."

"I will. You can go home now, my dear. I'm going to ring up Parsons and get him to come over and have a look at my leg. It's worse, and I've got a temperature. We're certainly working hard for that money! I'll tell him about to-day's walk and that you've rung me and you're very worried because your husband hasn't put in an appearance. When you get home, ring up Colonel Fletcher. Tell him quite briefly that Henry and I had a date on the moors this morning but that Henry didn't turn up and now, as it's so late and he hasn't come home, you're getting very anxious. He'll think that's quite normal and proper."

"Suppose he wants to come round and see me?"

"If he presses you, you'll have to pretend you'll be glad, of course. You can say you're tired—he won't stay long and if he does he'll only sympathise. But there's nothing he can do to-night, anyway, in this weather, so he'll probably simply say he'll call round in the morning. I'll have to leave that to you—it's straightforward—you can handle it."

"All right." She got up stiffly. "I seem to do nothing these days but drive to and fro between my house and your cottage. When do we get in touch again?"

"There's no hurry. We've done all we can do. They'll come and ask *me* most of the questions—all you know is that Henry left you at the Hotel at ten o'clock and you've been waiting for him ever since. Don't say you came here or that you were on the moors, but don't deny it either. You've a good reason for doing both, if anyone asks. I don't suppose they will. Good-night."

"Good-night," said Denise. She was too tired even to kiss him.

Back at the house, she rang up Colonel Fletcher. Mrs. Fletcher answered the phone.

"I'm afraid Jack's out," she said. "He's gone into Exeter and won't be back till late. Can I tell him anything?"

"It's about Henry," said Denise. "He and Mr. Trant had a sort of bet to-day about who could get to Cranmere Pool first. I saw Henry off but he never turned up at the meeting place and he hasn't come home. I'm terribly worried—he's never done anything like this before. I'm afraid he may have hurt himself. I don't understand it at all."

"How extraordinary. Most worrying, I agree. It's such a dreadful night, and after all this lovely weather . . . I'll tell Jack directly he gets in. I don't see that you can do anything now, do you?"

"Not in this rain—and I'm dead tired. Perhaps Henry will come in later—he may have gone off somewhere, though I really don't see how or why. Will you ask the Colonel to ring me in the morning?"

"Of course, my dear—first thing. Don't worry—I'm sure it'll be all right. But it certainly is strange. What does Mr. Trant think?"

"I talked to him on the phone just now," said Denise cautiously. "He can't understand it at all—he was very surprised when Henry didn't turn up. He's very fed up because he hurt his leg again on the way back, poor man. Altogether, it's been a most unfortunate day. I always did hate the moors. Anyway, we'll see. Good-night."

"Good-night," said Mrs. Fletcher. "Henry will probably turn up all right in an hour or two."

With a long sigh of relief, Denise hung up. Then she went off to bed. Betty would let herself in with her own key.

As soon as she was in bed, Denise sank into the heavy sleep of utter exhaustion. She didn't dream and she didn't stir. She slept till nine in the morning when Betty brought up her usual cup of tea.

## CHAPTER 14

AFTER Denise had left him, Trant did one more job of clearing up. He put away in a drawer the knife and torch she had taken on to the

moor, hung up his binoculars and carefully burned in the fire the piece of sacking and the coil of rope. They were so wet that it took nearly half an hour to consume them. The rucksack was rather dirty, but there was nothing suspicious about it and he simply slung it over a line to dry.

About half-past ten Dr. Parsons called at the cottage in reply to a telephone summons. He knew Trant well, for he had looked after his leg in the hospital, but they had not seen much of each other since.

"Sorry to bring you here on such a night, doc," Trant said. "Fact is, I've gone and undone all your good work. Have a look at this." He removed the bandage and showed his leg.

Parsons clicked his tongue between his teeth. "How the devil did you do that?"

Trant made a wry face. "I'm afraid I let my enthusiasm for the moors run away with me. You know Wycherley, of course—I was over to dinner with him the other night and we got talking about Cranmere Pool and our walking abilities. He bet me fifty guineas he could race me there."

Parsons raised a Scottish eyebrow. "That's a lot of money," he said.

"It ought to please you. The loser was going to send a cheque to the hospital. Anyway, to cut a long story short, Mr. Wycherley was to start from New Bridges and I from here. On my way back, I caught my leg in a boulder and this is the result."

"You should have had more sense than to try a thing like that with your leg," said the doctor severely. "Damn fool thing to do—it was asking for trouble."

"You're quite right, doc. I'm in sackcloth. What's worrying me now more than the leg is that something seems to have happened to Mr. Wycherley. He never turned up at the Pool, and Mrs. Wycherley rang me up a while ago and said he hadn't come home."

Parsons paused in his examination. "That's extraordinary. You mean you never saw him?"

"Not a glimpse. Mrs. Wycherley drove him over to the New Bridges Hotel and actually saw him strike up on to the moors, going strong. But he never showed up at the Pool. I waited up there for about an hour and a half, and then concluded that he'd thought better of the whole thing. So I came back and rang up Mrs. Wycherley. We expected that at least he'd put in an appearance during the evening. When he didn't, I thought maybe he'd sprained his ankle. I'd have gone back myself and looked for him except for this damned leg. How's it shaping?"

"It'll be all right, but you mustn't on any account walk on it—not even round the house. I'm surprised you didn't call me earlier. It must have hurt you a lot. When did it happen?"

"I suppose between two and three. I'd have rung you, but I was anxious about Mr. Wycherley and at the same time I didn't want to start a scare unnecessarily. I felt sure he'd be back. Mrs.



Wycherley is ringing up Colonel Fletcher and telling him about it to-night. It looks as though there'll have to be a search party to-morrow."

Parsons grunted. "It'll be a bit late if the man's been lying out on the moors all night. Well, remember you don't use this leg until I tell you you can. I warn you it's going to be a longish job. What about your meals and things?"

"There's a woman at the 'Rod and Line' who comes in and 'does' for me. I'll be all right."

"Good. I'll look in to-morrow. You may have trouble in sleeping—I'll leave you a few tablets. Good-night."

"Good-night, doc.—and thanks."

Dr. Parsons drove on slowly to another case. "Wish I could afford to put fifty guineas on a single bet," he thought to himself. "The man must have money. And how very odd about Wycherley!"

The storm blew itself out during the night and when Denise was wakened by Betty the sun was shining again. She felt stiff all over, but much fresher than she would have believed possible.

"Oh, dear," she said, with great presence of mind, sitting up and looking at the empty bed beside her, "Mr. Wycherley's not back. You've heard no word of him, have you, Betty?"

"No, ma'am," said Betty, surprised.

"He was out on the moors yesterday and he didn't come home. This is dreadful. Hand me the telephone, will you?"

She rang Colonel Fletcher's number, and he answered himself, "Good morning, Colonel—this is Mrs. Wycherley. No, he's not back. I'm sure something's happened. . . . Will you? That's nice of you. I'll expect you in a little under an hour. All right. Thank you so much—goodbye." She hung up.

"Colonel Fletcher's coming round," said Denise. "I do wonder what's happened. All right, Betty, I'll get up for breakfast."

There was still something on her mind—some little nagging thing. Oh, yes, she remembered now. The bundle of dirty clothes. What was she to do about them?

The more she thought about it, the more difficult the problem of their disposal appeared. Betty was the real difficulty. If Denise washed them herself—an unprecedented thing—Betty would certainly find out. Those heavy clothes would take so long to dry—it was impossible to do it secretly. She couldn't get rid of them altogether, either—Betty knew far too much about her wardrobe and would be bound to miss them. If any questions were asked ever, she would remember they were missing.

Denise realized that she and Trant had been careless about these clothes. She ought to have left them at Trant's—he could have made some sort of a job of cleaning them up and she could have fetched them to-day. But they had both been tired out, and they had had so many things to think about. Denise turned the problem over in

her mind for several minutes. In the end, she decided that the only thing to do was to be quite frank about where she had been. It was true that Trant had told her not to say that she had been on the moors unless someone asked, but being a man he probably hadn't foreseen this domestic difficulty. Also it would seem very strange if she said nothing about having gone to look for her husband until a point blank question was put. It was the sort of thing one would naturally volunteer at an early stage.

She called Betty in again. "By the way," she said, "there's a bundle of very dirty walking clothes at the bottom of the wardrobe. When Mr. Wycherley didn't come back yesterday afternoon I went out to look for him and got caught in that awful rain. They're in a real mess—I kept on slipping down. I wish you'd clean them up this morning, because I may have to go out again. They'll probably all need washing."

Betty nodded. She was a willing girl. "All right, ma'am—I'll take them into the kitchen and see what I can do. It must have been dreadful for you, hating the moors so. I do hope Mr. Wycherley comes back soon."

. . . . .

Colonel Fletcher drove up with a shriek of braked wheels a few minutes before ten. He was a man of sixty, with a red face suggestive of slight blood pressure, square shoulders and a somewhat aggressive military carriage. He was almost bald, but he made up in bushiness of speckled grey eyebrow what he lacked in hair on his scalp. He was inclined to be opinionated, and if he didn't like a man he called him a 'pinhead'. He was extremely active for his years, and very gallant with the ladies. He was popular in the district and took his job of Chief Constable as seriously as the somewhat exiguous duties permitted. He and Henry had been good neighbours, and his perturbation was written on his face as he shook hands with Denise. "This is the most amazing thing, Mrs. Wycherley. I must say I don't like it at all. Henry was the last man in the world to stay away from home without saying a word. Much too considerate. Please tell me the whole story."

Denise was at home again, playing a part. With understandable anxiety in her face and manner, she told the Colonel about the wager and its sequel. "Henry just vanished into thin air," she said. "I saw him walking off, as happy as could be, in the right direction and with no thought in his mind except to get to Cranmere Pool before Mr. Trant. I drove home, quite expecting that they would come along here together in the afternoon and looking forward to a pleasant cup of tea while they told their story. Instead, I got a telephone call from Mr. Trant saying that Henry hadn't put in an appearance. Naturally, we were both worried. He would have gone back at once only he hurt his leg—I expect Alma told you. I didn't know what to do so in the end I went out myself."

"You! What, out on the moors? Alma didn't tell me that."

"She didn't know. I was so worn out last night when I rang I didn't think it worth while to go into details. But I just *couldn't* sit at home."

"You should have rung up in the afternoon—I would have gone. My dear Mrs. Wycherley, it must have been a great ordeal—I'm so sorry. It was such bad weather too."

"I know. Of course, if I'd known it was going to rain I probably wouldn't have gone. I expect it was stupid of me. I thought he might be lying out there with a sprained ankle or something. Oh, I do hope he's all right."

"Well," said the Colonel briskly, "I can see we'll have to search. I'll get in touch with Brewer right away. We'll call on Trant and get the details of the route from him and then we'll go up to the Pool. I shouldn't worry, Mrs. Wycherley—I'm sure it'll turn out all right. If he's up there, we'll have him back by this evening."

He gave her shoulder a reassuring pat and drove off.

. . . . .

Superintendent Brewer was in his office. He and the Chief Constable worked well together and respected each other. Brewer was tall, thin and bony. He could look over Colonel Fletcher's head and down the other side. His face was cadaverous and his jaw was long. He was a man of immense energy and absolute integrity and he had a passion for hollyhocks.

The Colonel wasted no time on preliminaries. "Henry Wycherley's lost on the moors, Superintendent," he said. "Went up yesterday to the Pool and didn't come back. Can you leave someone in charge and come up with me?"

"Of course," said Brewer. "Mr. Wycherley, of all people; I never thought anything would happen to him up there. Shall we take a stretcher?"

"Might as well—you never know. Put it in the back of the car. We've got to call at Trant's place—'Rosemary Cottage'. I'll tell you about it as we go."

. . . . .

Trant had been talking briefly to Denise, who had rung him up. "Come in, Colonel," he cried cordially. "Morning, Superintendent, I thought you'd be along—Mrs. Wycherley just telephoned me. This is a most disturbing business, isn't it? I wish I could come with you. Henry was such a good fellow—I do hope things are all right."

"We'll soon find him if he's there," said the Colonel confidently. "Can you tell us anything that will help?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. All I know is that he actually started—Mrs. Wycherley saw him. I set out from here at ten sharp, and Henry left New Bridges at the same time. I made a pretty good pace and reached the Pool at 11.42. I noticed the time, of course, because frankly I was rather proud of it. Even so, I more than half expected to see Henry up on the skyline waiting for me. But there was no one

about, so I sat down and waited. When he didn't show up, I began to think he'd changed his mind at the last minute. I ate the lunch that I'd taken up with me but when I'd finished there was still no sign of him."

"You didn't go on further to see if you could find him?" asked the Colonel.

"I walked on I suppose about a quarter of a mile after lunch, but to tell you the truth I was rather tired and it never occurred to me that anything could have happened to him. I felt quite certain at that time that he hadn't started out. I stayed till just after one o'clock and then set off back. I was nearly home when I had the accident to my leg. I guess that's about all I know."

"So it's possible," said Fletcher, "that Henry could have had a fall between New Bridges and the Pool, even quite near the Pool, and you wouldn't have known anything about it?"

"I'm afraid so, yes."

"Well, we must go over his route. Have you any idea where Mrs. Wycherley went in her search?"

"Not the foggiest." Trant, ignorant of what Denise had said, was very much on guard. "She was too tired to talk."

"I suppose so. All right, we'll be getting along."

"Do you think there's any possibility that the old boy suddenly lost his memory, or something," said Trant. "He was a bit odd at times."

"We'll have to think about that if we don't find him. Let's see, what was he wearing?"

"I don't know exactly," said Trant. "Something peculiar, no doubt. He usually wears his old panama hat on the moors. It's a white one, and very battered."

"It should be a good landmark. Thanks, Mr. Trant—I'll let you know any developments. Hope the leg's feeling a bit easier now."

"Good luck," said Trant. "I do hope you find him, and that it's nothing serious."

. . . . .

The two men strode easily across the fields to the river. Both were outdoor men, and both knew the moors intimately. The Superintendent carried the light canvas stretcher. They didn't talk much, saving their breath. They reached the Pool in an hour and three-quarters—almost the exact time that Trant had said it had taken him. At the shepherd's hut they had a short rest.

"Not bad time for a man with a game leg," said Brewer. He looked thoughtfully in the direction of New Bridges. "You know, if Mr. Wycherley took the shortest way he'd have had to come by the mires."

"I'd thought of that too," said Fletcher. "But Wycherley knew the mires like a schoolboy knows his stamp collection. He'd never have made a mistake."

"They're bad this year," said Brewer.

"Yes, the farmers have been grumbling. Come on, let's find out."

They began to drop down the slope towards the mires, and both were eagerly scanning the ground ahead.

Suddenly Fletcher grabbed the Superintendent's arm. "Look, Super, what's that white spot? By gad, I believe it's a hat." He trained his glasses on it and then handed them without a word to Brewer.

"You're right, sir. It *is* a hat."

They covered the last few hundred yards in record time and though he knew it was useless the Colonel broke into a run at the finish. They stopped together by the mire and looked at the protruding leg.

The Colonel spoke first. His face was shiny with sweat. "Poor chap," he said. "Poor old fellow. What an end!" He mopped his head, trying to conceal his emotion.

The Superintendent looked a bit green, for all his experience. He shook his head. "It's going to be a nasty job getting him out," he said.

"I'll lend a hand," said Fletcher. The Superintendent grasped the outstretched leg and began to heave. As the body came up, Fletcher took hold of the strap of the rucksack and gave it an additional pull. The mire gave up its prey with a last gurgle.

"Good job we brought the stretcher," said Fletcher grimly. "This is going to be a bad shock for Mrs. Wycherley, I'm afraid. We'll have to leave his hat and stick—can't get at them. I wonder how it happened."

"It's right on the route, no doubt about that. P'raps he fell off the rock, though what he'd be doing there I can't imagine. Perfect weather, it was, too."

Fletcher pushed his stick into the mire. "It's not particularly deep just here, but it may be in the middle. I suppose he fell in and then panicked. Maybe his heart's bad. We'll know better when the doc's looked at him. Anyway, I don't think there's anything more we can do here. Let's go down."

. . . . .

It was a hard struggle getting the body down some of the steep sloping hillsides, but two hours or so after leaving the Pool, Brewer and the Colonel deposited their load just inside the gate which opened on to the main road. Brewer had covered the face and shoulders with his jacket, but the general effect was grisly in the extreme as gouts of black mud still trickled from the slimy legs.

The Colonel kept watch while Brewer drove into town for an ambulance. Twenty minutes later the Superintendent was accompanying the body to the mortuary while Fletcher set out to break the news to Denise. It would be a hateful business. She had always seemed an affectionate and devoted wife, and it would be bound to be a great shock to her.

Denise was sitting in the garden, reading a magazine. When she heard the Colonel's footsteps she sprang up and faced him, anxiety written all over her features. "No news?" she asked.

The Colonel took her arms and looked at her gravely. "There is news," he said. "Bad news, I'm afraid. You'll have to be brave, my dear."

"You mean—oh, no!"

"Henry's dead. We found his body up beyond the Pool."

Denise stared at him for a second, then dropped down beside the chair on which she had been sitting with a little cry and knelt there with her face buried in her hands and her shoulders heaving. The Colonel stood by, embarrassed, uncertain what to do. Presently he touched her again.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "Perhaps I'd better leave you now. If there's anything I or my wife can do . . ."

Denise got up, slowly. It was a brilliant performance. There were even real tears on her cheeks and she looked very woebegone.

"Wait a minute, please. I—I'll be better now. It was such a shock. And I feel it was partly my fault. If I'd let you know earlier yesterday, or gone on further myself . . ."

Fletcher shook his head. "It would have been just the same. You'll know sooner or later, so I may just as well tell you now. He fell in a mire and was—well, drowned. He was dead long before anybody could have done anything."

Denise gave a little shudder. "What a dreadful death! Poor Henry!" There was a quaver in her voice again as she pictured the scene. "To die all alone like that, and on such a lovely day. How do you think it could have happened?"

"Probably we shall never know. I would have said myself that it was impossible for a man like Henry to make such a mistake in broad daylight. He may have seen something beside the mire that attracted his attention and not looked where he was going. You know what he's like if he sees a rare butterfly. There's a big rock above the mire—he may have fallen off that. It's no good worrying about that now, my dear. Would you like me to ask Alma to come over and see you?"

"I—thank you very much, but I think I'd rather be alone, just for a while. It's a terrible shock. He was so cheerful and gay yesterday. I don't think I shall ever feel the same again."

The Colonel was deeply moved. "Oh, yes, you will," he said solemnly. "You may not think so now, but Time is a great healer, you know."

He said goodbye and drove slowly back to the police station with the knowledge that he'd done his duty well. Poor girl, she had been even more fond of Henry than he had supposed!

Back at the mortuary, the remains of Henry were laid out on a table. The corpse had been cleansed and the police surgeon had made his report.

"Death by drowning," Brewer said, passing on the information. "MacKintosh says his heart was unusually sound for his years. He

was alive all right when he went into the mire. There's water in the lungs and mud in the respiratory passage."

Fletcher nodded. "Everything else quite normal? If so, we can go ahead with the inquest. The sooner we can get the formalities over, the easier it'll be for Mrs. Wycherley. She's taking it hard."

The Superintendent looked worried. "There's something a bit strange—I think you should see for yourself." He held up the watch wrist with the watch still on it.

The Colonel looked closer. "That's very odd," he said. "Very odd indeed. Absent-minded fellow, Henry."

Brewer nodded. "It's not exactly what you'd expect considering he was on a walking race. And the watch had apparently stopped before he fell in the mire. It says 11.10—I don't think he could possibly have reached the place by that time. Maybe that doesn't mean much, but the other thing . . . Anyway, I've had it photographed."

The Colonel looked startled. "You have? Oh, there must be some explanation. Let's take the watch off."

Brewer struggled with the strap. "Not so easy," he said. "It's shrunk in the water. Ah, that's got it." Carefully he eased the strap from the soft flesh and looked at the wrist.

The Colonel pointed. "That's odd, too. See the white mark where the strap went round and kept the mud away? Now look here—there's a spot of muck right in the centre of the whiteness. How the hell did that get there?"

Brewer scratched his head. "I suppose it might have . . . No, I don't see. Maybe he was playing about with it. . . . It doesn't make sense."

"Better get a close-up of the wrist," said the Colonel.

While the photograph was being taken, Fletcher examined the watch. "It's fully wound," he said. "Probably overwound. Works look dirty. We'd better get an expert on it."

He looked hard at Brewer. "Well, Super, I must say I don't like it. I'd prefer to go right ahead and get the poor fellow underground but—that watch business is worrying."

"Just what I felt," said Brewer. "The more you think of it, the stranger it seems. I think we ought to make some inquiries—just to be on the safe side."

The Colonel nodded. "But do it as tactfully as you can," he said. "We don't want a lot of gossip in the town."

## CHAPTER 15

BREWER'S immediate aim was to clear up the mystery of the watch without disclosing to anyone that he thought there was anything odd

about it. He called first upon Denise, who seemed a little surprised to see him.

Brewer shook hands but politely refused the chair she offered him. "I just wanted to say how very sorry I am, Mrs. Wycherley. I do offer you my most sincere condolences. I won't keep you a moment, but there are just one or two routine matters that I'd like to clear up so that everything goes smoothly at the inquest. There's this matter of the watch . . ."

"Yes," said Denise, her face expressionless.

"The watch had stopped, you know."

Denise nodded. She was beginning to hate this already, and it had only just begun. One slip, and she would give herself away. She had to remember just the right amount, but not too much. "It had stopped before Henry began his walk," she said.

"When did you discover it had stopped?"

"Actually, not until we were at the New Bridges Hotel and Henry was about to leave. I said something about the time, and he looked at his watch and said it had stopped."

"Do you remember at what time it had stopped?"

"I think it was ten minutes past eleven." How right Charles had been, she thought, to send her back to the moor to put the hands back. "Henry said he must have overwound it when he went to bed the night before."

"Yes, I see. Funny he didn't notice in the morning, particularly as he was going on a race."

"Oh, Henry was like that—he was hopeless with watches. He relied on me—poor old Henry." And she delicately dabbed her eyes with a tiny handkerchief.

"Yes—well, thank you very much. I'm sorry to have bothered you. Goodbye, Mrs. Wycherley."

Denise walked with him to his car. "When do you think the inquest will be?" she asked. "I shall be so glad when it's over."

"Probably in a couple of days," said Brewer. He raised his hat, compressed his gaunt length into the driving seat, and departed.

He drove rapidly to the New Bridges Hotel and went into the private bar for a drink. There was no one there but the barman, and he was talkative. The news of the tragedy on the moor had reached the Hotel.

Brewer leaned against the bar and sipped his beer. "Yes, it's a very terrible thing," he agreed.

"You inquiring into it?"

"Not much to inquire into, I'm afraid. It's only too obvious what happened. I suppose nobody saw him off?"

"Oh, yes, they did," said the barman. "Mr. Crutch saw him off—went out into the road with him and his missus and saw the old boy set off. He was telling us about it this morning."

"Is Mr. Crutch about?"



"Yes—I'll call him if you like."

"Thanks," said the Superintendent, and finished his beer.

Crutch came in a couple of minutes later, still wearing plus fours. He knew Brewer quite well and they shook hands.

"I wanted you to show me just where Mr. Wycherley started from," said Brewer. "Shall we go outside?"

"Only too glad. What a dreadful thing to happen. I couldn't believe it when I heard. I still can't understand it." He led the way to the road and across to the verge beyond. "The three of us stood together here," he said. "It was just on ten o'clock—wireless time. Mr. Wycherley was full of beans and eager to be off. We wished him luck and he went through that gate and up by the wall. That's all there was to it. A beautiful day, too. It beats me, Superintendent."

"Did he have the time with him?" asked Brewer.

"Curious you should mention that. His watch had stopped at 11.10. He'd overwound it and hadn't noticed. We all had a go at it but we couldn't start the thing. So he went off with it like that. Mrs. Wycherley offered hers to him, but he said it didn't matter."

"What do you mean when you say you all 'had a go' at it? Did he take it off?"

"Oh, yes. Mrs. Wycherley looked at it and shook it, and she passed it up to me. I opened the back, and shook it, and it seemed to be pretty well jammed up, and I tried the winder and found it was fully wound. Then I handed it back to him."

"And he put it on?"

"Of course. Why, hasn't he got it with him? I saw him put it on. You know how you always watch anyone struggling with a watch strap."

"Yes, he's got it with him all right," said Brewer cautiously. "It's just that we always like to get these details right. Anyway, you didn't notice anything else at all—nothing struck you as funny?"

Crutch shook his head. "There wasn't anything else. We went out and he left."

"Thanks," said Brewer. "I must be getting along. Too bad—it's a great loss to the district."

. . . . .

Brewer reported to the Chief Constable. "I like it less and less," he said. "You know Crutch—helps to manage the New Bridges Hotel. A good man, bright and observant. He was with the Wycherleys when Mr. Wycherley set off. He confirms that the watch had stopped at 11.10. They all had it in their hands. He watched Mr. Wycherley put it on again. Says it was all quite normal. He noticed nothing peculiar."

Fletcher gave a little groan. "We're getting into deep waters. If what Crutch says is right, then I can only think of two explanations . . . and one isn't really an explanation at all. Either Mr. Wycherley went completely crazy during his walk and behaved absolutely

unaccountably—or else another person fiddled with the watch after he'd started."

"Yes," said Brewer grimly. "After he was dead and in the mire. Took it off and put it back. That's the only explanation for the things we found."

"It's incredible," said Fletcher.

"It's the evidence, sir," said Brewer.

"If anyone came to the mire and pulled the body out sufficiently to monkey with the watch, and then put it back again and left it, there's only one conclusion to be drawn. Murder!"

"Come to that, sir, it's a good deal more likely an explanation than accident. Every single person I've talked to has said he didn't believe Mr. Wycherley would have fallen in the mire. Frankly, having seen the place, I find it difficult to believe myself. But murder—why, it's a grand spot for the job."

"There were no marks on the body," the Colonel pointed out. "No sign of any violence."

"You wouldn't need much violence with a little man like Mr. Wycherley. Any man of normal strength could have held his head in a mire without much of a struggle."

"What a devilish thing if that happened. Good God, it would mean suffocating the fellow alive. Can you imagine deliberately holding someone's face in that muck till they choked?"

"It sounds inhuman, sir, but I've known men capable of doing it and so have you. I think I'll get MacKintosh to check over the body again for marks and bruises, though I don't suppose we'll find any."

"What I can't see at all," said Fletcher, "is why it would have been necessary to pull the body out of the mire once it was in. Just let's suppose a murderer, for the sake of argument. He knows that Wycherley was going out on the moor. He meets him and kills him. For some reason or other he wants to monkey with the watch. Why shouldn't he do it before he shoves the body in the mire? That's obviously the best time."

"Perhaps he did it as an afterthought or remembered some mistake."

"H'm. If we're right about a murder, it all looks much too carefully planned for that. But there must have been some damned good reason. Why should the murderer have been so interested in the watch anyway? Trying to fix an alibi, do you suppose? That's the usual reason."

"It's an obvious line, sir. But half a minute. Mr. Wycherley's watch had stopped, don't forget. And people knew it had stopped—his wife and Crutch, for instance."

"Maybe the murderer didn't know that. It stopped at 11.10. As far as the murderer was concerned, that could have been 11.10 in the morning. During the walk. In other words, there's no reason why the murderer shouldn't have felt himself free to alter the time on the watch if he wanted to and so give himself an alibi. But, damn it, he *didn't* do that. He simply monkeyed about in a way which would hang him if it were ever discovered and left the hands at 11.10 just as

they were. So where's your attempted alibi. It's very complicated and doesn't make much sense."

Brewer shook his head sadly. "Nor to me, at the moment, I'm afraid. I keep on getting little glimmerings of light but I can't nail them down." Brewer was never much of a man for metaphors. "What we need is more information. I'll see if I can find any other traces of an alibi along the trail."

"Whose trail?" asked the Colonel, quickly.

"Well, sir, Trant's, of course. If it *was* done, who else could have done it. He certainly had the opportunity—he and Mr. Wycherley appear to have had the whole moor to themselves all morning. Trant didn't mention seeing anyone else, and no-one else left New Bridges as far as we know, though I'll check up. Besides, if any third person were involved he'd have had to know Mr. Wycherley's plans pretty exactly, and if he'd known the plans he'd have known that the worst time to attempt a murder was when his victim was going to meet someone else."

"I don't know that you're right there, Superintendent. What a magnificent opportunity for a frame-up. If you *did* know about the wager, you'd only have to strike across the moors from a third point. Suppose I'd known about it, for instance. I could have started say, at Chagford and met Wycherley at the mire and murdered him."

"I think you'd have concluded, sir, that it was too risky. How would you have known exactly what time Trant was going to turn up—how far he'd go beyond the Pool? The whole nasty job must have taken quite a long while. You couldn't risk being caught with a body on your hands."

Fletcher nodded. "That's fair enough, I should certainly have wanted the whole moor to myself. But why should Trant want to murder Wycherley? Do you think he's been left some money? He doesn't know Wycherley very well."

"His wife's probably been left a lot of money," said Brewer. "We'll have to look into that. And they knew each other at the hospital."

"Super, you're not suggesting . . . Oh, no, you're wrong there. Mrs. Wycherley's frightfully cut up—you should have seen her this morning. I can't believe that for a moment. She's been happily married to Wycherley for all these years and there's never been a breath of scandal of any sort. Most respectable."

The Superintendent sighed. "The only other murder case I've ever handled," he said, "it was a minister's wife that gave her husband arsenic."

"Well, for heaven's sake don't let a hint of our suspicions get out. So far the evidence is sketchy."

"I'll be discretion itself," said Brewer. "I think, now, I'll take a run to New Bridges again and clear up that side of the trail first. I'd like to have another word or two with Mr. Crutch and I'd also like another look at the mire—there may be some footprints. I shall look at the place with different eyes, now. I'll see you later to-night, sir, or early to-morrow."

An hour later Brewer was striking up into the hills opposite the hotel, and he had Crutch with him. It was pleasanter to have a companion, and Crutch knew the mires better than he did himself.

"I'm afraid we shan't add much to our knowledge," Brewer told him. "If it hadn't rained so hard we might have been able to trace Mr. Wycherley's tracks and perhaps have seen how he got to the mire. The prospects now are dim."

Crutch was thoughtful. "Pretty tough on Mrs. Wycherley, all this," he said. "She's a lovely woman, isn't she? A real stunner! Mr. Wycherley was a fine man in his own way, but it's difficult to see how she came to marry him, all the same. I wouldn't have thought he was quite her cup of tea."

Brewer grunted. "What did you make of Mrs. Wycherley when she turned up with him yesterday? Was she keen on this idea of a wager?"

"As a matter of fact she was—to start with, anyway. When they first arrived she seemed very happy about the walk and interested how it would turn out—when I suggested jokingly that I'd like to go with Mr. Wycherley as his pacemaker she became quite indignant—said it wouldn't be fair!"

"Really," said Brewer, making a mental note.

"Later on, she kind of got cold feet—I don't know why. It was after the business of the watch. She asked him if he was sure he wanted to do the walk—she thought it might tire him."

"Bit late in the day to think of that," said Brewer.

"That's exactly what I thought—but you never know with women."

"And when Mr. Wycherley had gone, did she seem quite natural? No forebodings, or anything?"

"Oh, I don't think so—she was a bit agitated, but I put that down to the excitement of the race. You seem very interested in her, Super."

Brewer shrugged. "Not particularly. I just wondered if perhaps she was worried about his health or—well, mental state. I must ask her."

They reached the mire an hour and forty minutes after leaving the Hotel. Crutch stared fascinated at the bright green surface from which a part of Henry's stick protruded and on which his hat still lay. Brewer indicated where the body had been.

"Curious how far away the hat is," said Crutch. "I suppose if he fell off the rock . . ."

"The wind might have blown it," said Brewer. "It was rough up here last night."

As Brewer had expected, there were no clear footmarks except those which he and the Colonel had made near and around the mire that morning during their unsuspecting recovery of the body. The ground near the mire was completely churned up where they'd stood and hauled Henry out.

Brewer scouted round for some time, his sharp eyes exploring the turf and stones and mud in case there should be some tell-tale sign, some dropped article. But as far as he could see there were no coat

buttons or pocket knives or even cigarette ends. It was disappointing, but he had satisfied himself on the point and the journey had not therefore been wasted. The one additional fact he did glean was that there were no marks of any sort on top of the rock, even though there was soft soil which would have taken prints. It looked undisturbed and Brewer drew Crutch's attention to the fact, in case another witness should be required at any time. Then they set off back to the Hotel.

. . . . .

The Superintendent was beginning to feel tired. He had been out on the moors twice that day, and even his trained and lanky limbs were aching badly. He decided to pay one more call on Mrs. Wycherley and then sleep on it.

Betty opened the door to him and smiled wanly. "Hello, Mr. Brewer. I'm afraid Mrs. Wycherley is out for the moment. She's driven out to town to do some shopping. She hardly knows how to sit still. It's been such a dreadful day."

"I'm sure it has. Do you think she'll be long?"

"She ought to be back any minute. Won't you come in and wait for her. If you like, you can have a cup of tea. I'm just making one."

The Superintendent's eye lit up. "That's the nicest thing I've heard all day," he said gratefully. "I'm sure Mrs. Wycherley wouldn't mind." He stepped inside. "I'm afraid my boots aren't very clean. I've been out on the moors."

"It's always the same after a walk," said Betty. "I spent all this morning cleaning up Mrs. Wycherley's things. She was out yesterday looking for poor Mr. Wycherley, you know."

Brewer nodded. "It certainly makes one filthy, but I find this brown mud brushes off quite easily when it's dry."

Betty sniffed. "The mud she got on her wasn't brown. It was black and sticky. She must have had an awful time. I had to wash everything—breeches and stockings and beret and everything."

"Even her beret?" said Brewer. "Well, at least I didn't get it on my hat. Was she out long yesterday, do you know?"

"I don't know—she didn't tell me. It was my afternoon and evening off—I didn't know anything had happened until this morning." She went off to get the tea, and when it arrived the Superintendent drank three large cups. He was just thinking that perhaps he wouldn't wait when Denise came in.

She gave him a faint smile. "Back again, Mr. Brewer? Ah, I'm glad Betty got you some tea. I could do with some myself. Well, what is it this time?"

The Superintendent said slowly: "I was wondering whether there was anything about Mr. Wycherley's health which would throw any light on this affair. He hadn't done anything lately, I suppose, which had given you any cause for worry. No mental disturbance?"

Denise hesitated. "You mean you think he might have committed suicide? What a dreadful idea! Jumping off a rock into a mire? He wouldn't do that, surely. No one would. But he has been a bit

worried, I know, about his book—though nothing that you could really point to.”

“No, I see. And there wasn’t anything about his physical health that would have caused you anxiety? Nothing to make you think it would be unwise for him to do this walk, for instance?”

“He was always very fit, Superintendent. I didn’t think there was any reason to try and stop him.”

“I just wondered. I was over at New Bridges just now—Mr. Crutch there said something about your having been worried. He said that at the last minute you tried to persuade Mr. Wycherley not to go. Why was that?”

Brewer’s deep-set eyes were fixed on her face, and for a couple of seconds her mind blacked out. These awful questions! What should she say? What should she say? She *must* think of something.

Then her head cleared. She smiled again. “You know what women are, Superintendent. I don’t know why—I—perhaps I had a sort of presentiment. I just felt at that moment it would be better if Henry didn’t attempt it. Wives get that kind of feeling sometimes. It passed at once. There was no real reason for it. I wish I’d followed my instinct at that moment, and not let him go. It would have prevented this awful tragedy.”

Brewer was sympathetic. “It’s so easy for all of us to be right after the event,” he said. “I don’t see that you can possibly blame yourself. You must try not to let this affair prey on your mind, you know. You’re probably very tired. That long search on the moors that you carried out single-handed yesterday must have been enough to exhaust anyone. How long were you away?”

“It seemed hours and hours,” said Denise. “I left almost at once when Mr. Trant told me Henry hadn’t met him, and I got back—oh, just before dark. I was wet through—Betty’s been cleaning my clothes all day.”

“I can well believe it. It’s extraordinary you didn’t get lost completely. How far did you go?”

“I don’t even know, exactly. Somewhere near the Pool, I think. Mr. Trant gave me some directions and I tried to follow them.”

“It must have been most difficult.”

“It was. Well, goodbye Mr. Brewer. If I can help you at all please don’t hesitate to call back again.”

When he was gone she sank huddled into a chair. How long could they go on with these inquiries. Why did they have to do so much inquiring? Did they suspect anything? Both the Colonel and the Superintendent had been so polite and friendly, but they’d given nothing away. If this went on much longer, she would have to get in touch with Trant. The loneliness and uncertainty were becoming unbearable. She cheered herself up slightly with the thought that they couldn’t *prove* anything.

Brewer went home with the knowledge that he’d done an excellent day’s work. There were still a lot of matters to be dealt with. Tomorrow morning he would report to the Colonel and they could talk

over all these new details. He considered the position. He hadn't got very far with the question of the alibi, but he'd established one or two things. Yesterday morning, Mrs. Wycherley had set out with Henry apparently without a qualm. At the hotel she had become disturbed about the project and the disturbance had apparently followed the incident of the watch. Later in the day, at a rather vague time in the afternoon, she had gone out on the moors and had spent five or six hours there alone. She had returned black with mud from head to foot. The case was building up.

## CHAPTER 16

BREWER was up early next morning and carefully went over his findings with the Chief Constable. Then, soon after opening time, he went along to the 'Rod and Line' for a pint of beer. Fred Barlow, the landlord, was serving behind the bar himself and in a few moments the conversation turned naturally to the tragedy on the previous day.

"Such a pity," said Fred, "and them feeling so cheerful about the race. It doesn't seem possible it was only yesterday morning that I was talking and laughing about it all here with Mr. Trant."

Brewer cocked his ears. "Mr. Trant was here, was he?"

"Yes, he looked in soon after half-past nine and told me about the wager. He promised to call again in the evening and tell me the result, but then of course he hurt his foot."

"Does he often come here in the morning?"

"Well, no, I can't say that he does. As a matter of fact, I can't remember him ever having done it before, come to think of it. I suppose he was so full of the wager he wanted to tell me about it."

"Was that all he came for?"

"Let me see—no, I remember now he wanted me to go fishing to-day. I could have gone, too, except for his leg. We chatted a few minutes about a trout he said he'd caught—well, p'raps he did catch it—and about five minutes to ten he said he'd have to be off as he'd got to leave his cottage punctually at ten because of the bet."

"I suppose no one saw him leave the cottage, as far as you know?"

"Haven't heard of anyone. Why, what's on your mind, Super?"

"Oh, nothing," said Brewer. "Just routine inquiries."

He called next at 'Rosemary Cottage.' Trant was sitting in his dressing-gown in an easy chair with his leg up on another chair.

"Good morning, Mr. Trant," said the Superintendent. "I'm afraid I was too busy to get in touch with you last night. You heard the bad news, I suppose?"

Trant nodded soberly. "The woman from the 'Rod and Line' told me when she came in to clean. A dreadful business—truly dreadful.

It's depressed me very much. Such a good fellow! Who would ever have thought that he would meet with an accident like that? Have you formed any idea as to how it happened?"

The Superintendent shook his head. "I went up there from the other side and had a look round yesterday," he said, "but there's precious little indication. He must have been sleep-walking. How's the leg?"

"Improving, thanks. The doctor was in a few minutes ago. It'll be all right, but I'm still tied to my chair."

"You must have had a hell of a job getting home," said Brewer sympathetically.

"I did. It took me ages to walk up the lane."

"I suppose you got it seen to right away?"

"Well, as a matter of fact I didn't. I was so worried about Henry I sort of let it slide, and then Mrs. Wycherley came over and dressed it for me."

"Aha! Before she went out on the moors?"

"That's right."

"And I suppose she looked in again later?"

Trant hesitated. "Yes, she did. She changed the bandage."

"She must have been pretty whacked after all that time on the moors in such weather. Good of her to come round."

"Very," said Trant. "I say, Superintendent, just what are you driving at exactly?"

"Nothing at all," said Brewer. "Just routine, you know. What happens about the wager—I suppose it lapses?"

"Naturally. I can hardly collect from a dead man."

"Pity. Fifty guineas is quite a lot of money."

"It's the hospital that will suffer, I'm afraid," said Trant. "Or perhaps I'll send them a cheque myself—I owe them a good deal."

Brewer sighed. "You must be rolling in money to be able to make a wager like that. Wish I was." He looked at Trant in a way which seemed to press the question home.

Trant thought quickly. He began to see a nasty dilemma in his path. It would be dangerous if he left Brewer with the idea that he had plenty of money, and later the Superintendent found out that he hadn't, as he could easily do.

"As a matter of fact," Trant confided, "I'm pretty broke. That's one reason why I made the bet. Perhaps it doesn't do me much credit, but I wanted to repay the hospital for its kindness and I couldn't really afford to do it. So when Henry suggested the wager, I thought it was a good opportunity."

"But suppose you'd lost the wager?"

Trant smiled. "I knew I shouldn't."

"In your place," said Brewer, "I doubt if I'd have felt such confidence. You couldn't possibly have known the moors as well as Mr. Wycherley—or had you been studying the ground?"

"Oh, I went over it once or twice, of course," said Trant lightly. "That was fair enough."



"Timing yourself, I suppose?"

"Well, yes, I kept an eye on the time."

"Even so, Mr. Wycherley was very agile. And your leg must have been a bit of a handicap. I don't think the local population would have put much money on you, if they'd known about the wager."

"The leg wasn't too bad—and I'm as strong as a horse, you know."

"Yes," said Brewer reflectively, "I can see you're powerfully built. Well, I'll be leaving you. I just dropped in to see how you were and make sure you'd heard the news."

"Very nice of you, Superintendent. Come again."

When Brewer left, Trant sat very still with his brows knitted in thought. What the devil had the fellow really wanted? Raising all those nasty questions, as though he had something on his mind. Surely they couldn't have any suspicions—there had been nothing to arouse them. He went over the whole affair again in his mind, but could recall no mistake.

Brewer was also thinking about the interview. "Damned fishy!" he decided. "Fishy not calling the doctor right away and fishier still that he made that wager. I wonder how he could have felt so sure he was going to win. Probably some trick. Some way of cutting down his time. Wish I knew what!"

Trant rang Denise. "Hello," he said, "this is Trant. How are you? Yes, I'm sure it must be very lonely for you. Look, I wondered if you would care to call in and see me to-night—say about ten. I need cheering up too, with this damned leg. Oh, and by the way, you know that bicycle that I left handy so that I could cycle over to your place when the walk was over. It's still where I left it and I can't go and fetch it myself. I'm afraid it may get pinched. I wonder if you'd mind awfully bringing it up when you come. It's on my mind. You will—thanks so much. See you later. Goodbye."

Trant hung up. "That should take care of that," he thought. He knew that they ought to have got the bike up the previous night, but Denise had been 'all in'—she could never have done it.

The Chief Constable was sitting in the office of old Mr. Shields, senior partner in the firm of Shields, Shields & Baker, solicitors.

"You know, Colonel," Mr. Shields was saying, "we hate to do this sort of thing and it's only because you stress the absolute importance of the matter that I'm making this exception. Henry Wycherley's will is very, very simple. There are a few small bequests to various scientific organizations with which he's been connected—a thousand or two here and there—and there's a thousand pounds for his old house-keeper. The rest of his money goes unconditionally to his widow."

"Is it a large sum?"

"A very large sum. After all duties and costs are paid, it will be in the neighbourhood of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

The Colonel raised his eyebrows. "Has this will been made a long time or is it recent?"

"It was made about a year after Mr. Wycherley's marriage, and has never been altered. Mr. Wycherley was a very conscientious man and he felt that his wife was entitled to his fortune. Perhaps I should tell you, though, that Mr. Wycherley planned to make one substantial change in his financial arrangements just before he died. He was very keen on founding a chair in natural history at his old university, and he was planning to do this right away at a cost of about fifty thousand pounds."

The Colonel nodded. "I once heard him speak about some such project. Do you happen to know whether Mrs. Wycherley was aware that she was the beneficiary under the will?"

"Yes, she certainly knew. Mr. Wycherley once told me that he had confided to her the chief provisions of the will."

"And did she know about his proposed expenditure of fifty thousand pounds?"

"Yes, she knew about that too. Mr. Wycherley happened to meet me in Okecombe the day before his death, and he told me that she had taken the news very well. He was rather pleased with her."

"Thank you very much. That clears that up. There's just one more question—perhaps you won't care to answer it. Do you know anything about Mrs. Wycherley? Who she was—what her origins are—that sort of thing?"

The solicitor shook his head. "Very little, I'm afraid. I've often wondered, but of course it was none of my business. I remember Mr. Wycherley once said something about her having been born in Norway—in Tromsø, I believe—but he never talked about her much. There was never any occasion to."

He got up and shook hands. "Colonel Fletcher," he said, "You just assured me that this information was vital. From the nature of your questions, I assume you're not satisfied about Henry's death."

"Are you?" asked the Chief Constable.

The solicitor looked at him straight. "Nobody would ever convince me, Colonel, that Henry Wycherley fell into a mire so that he couldn't get out again, on a lovely day and in broad daylight. I wish you well in what I feel sure you must find a most uncongenial duty."

Back at his home, the Chief Constable was accosted on the way to his study by his charlady, Mrs. McCabe. She was apologetic, but in a rather determined sort of way. "I wonder if I could speak to you for a moment, sir?" she said.

"By all means," said the Colonel, wondering what domestic incident could have arisen which his wife couldn't deal with. "Come into the study, Mrs. McCabe. Now, what is it?"

"Well, sir, it's like this. I've got a little boy named Douglas. He's ten years old."

"I know him," said the Colonel. "A red-haired boy. I've seen him about. What's the trouble with him?"

"Nothing really, sir. He's a good boy at heart. Of course, he's always up to pranks, the same as boys always are, but he wouldn't do anything really bad."

"I'm sure he wouldn't," said the Colonel heartily.

"Well," said Mrs. McCabe, encouraged by her discovery that the audience was sympathetic, "the other day he was playing in a lane, the way boys do, and he found a bicycle under some hay. He's always wanted a bicycle, but with the war and one thing and another we thought we'd better wait. Anyway, sir, he thought he'd ride the bicycle a little bit, and he'd just got on it when the owner came along and was very angry."

The Colonel laughed. "I shouldn't take that to heart, Mrs. McCabe. A little passing annoyance with the young scamp—that doesn't amount to anything."

"Oh, but that's not all, sir. This man said my boy had been trying to steal the bike and threatened to put the police on him. He said Douglas would be put in prison if anyone found out about it. Well, Douglas has been worrying about it. He's been dreaming about going to prison. It's preying on his mind." Mrs. McCabe was becoming indignant. "I think it's a downright disgrace when a grown man tries to frighten a child like that and I don't care who knows it. I thought, sir, I'd be happier if I could tell you about it, you being the Chief Constable like."

"Don't worry, Mrs. McCabe. You tell Douglas from me that he's done nothing wrong and no one can put him in prison. Who was the man, by the way?"

"He doesn't know, sir. All he knows is that the man had something the matter with his leg."

"Eh? With his leg?" The Chief Constable suddenly became interested. "Where did this happen, do you know?"

"At the bottom of the hill leading up from the main road to the 'Rod and Line'. The man was in the field over on the river side and he was leaning on a gate. When he came into the road he was limping very badly. I wondered if it could have been Mr. Trant up at the Cottage, seeing as how he's hurt his leg, so they say, but he's usually such a nice man, I can hardly believe it."

"Is Douglas at home now?" asked the Colonel.

"He should be just back for his dinner."

"Very well, Mrs. McCabe. Now please don't say anything about this to anyone and I promise you that Douglas won't get into the slightest trouble. And thank you for coming to me about it."

. . . . .

"Yes, sir," said Superintendent Brewer. "I'll go along right away. It certainly makes you think, doesn't it? All sorts of possibilities. Then I'll pop in and see Trant and I'll be around to see you later."

He rang off and set off in his car to the cottage where the McCabes lived. He found Douglas kicking a ball about in the road. The boy looked very frightened when he saw the Superintendent stop.

"It's all right, young man," said Brewer with a friendly smile. "I know all about the bike and the police are quite sure you did nothing wrong and you've absolutely nothing to worry about. See?"

Douglas brightened at once. He was soon talking freely about 'the man' and though he was a little vague about the man's appearance the general description—"big and dark and wearing shorts and carrying a stick"—certainly fitted Trant. So did the time and the place.

On his way to 'Rosemary Cottage,' the Superintendent thought he'd stop and have a look at the place where the bicycle had lain—Douglas had described it to him. He found the pile of hay by the hedge and, to his surprise, the bicycle as well.

He thought for a moment, and then parked his car on the grass verge and pushed the bicycle up the hill to the cottage. Trant was still sitting in the same chair, and the Superintendent thought he didn't look too pleased at this second visit.

"I'm sorry to keep on bothering you, Mr. Trant," Brewer began cheerfully, "but this time it's about another matter entirely. We've found a bicycle without an owner, and someone said they thought it was yours." He was watching Trant closely.

"You have a busy time, don't you, Superintendent," said Trant with a smile which was meant to be pleasant. "Fatal accidents one day and lost bicycles the next. I suppose it may be mine. What's it like?"

"It's got a green double stripe round the mudguards and red handlegrips," said Brewer.

"That's the one. Well, I'm sorry to have given you trouble, but you've certainly saved someone else a journey. I suppose you found it down by the haystack."

"I believe that's where it was found."

"Yes, I left it there and wasn't able to bring it back. I was going over to the Wycherleys after the walk on the moor and I thought it would be less tiring to cycle. I put it down there early in the morning."

Brewer nodded understandingly. "You gave that young man a nasty fright over it," he said. "I must say I think you went a bit too far."

"Possibly," said Trant, "but my leg hurt and I was in the hell of a temper."

"I can appreciate that. Why were you so insistent that he shouldn't tell anybody?"

Trant cursed silently. What the devil should he say now? He p'ayed for time. "Look here, Superintendent, what is this catechism? I must say I don't very much like your tone."

Brewer waited stolidly.

"The fact is," said Trant, "I realized I'd made a bit of a fool of myself shouting at the boy and accusing him of trying to steal the

thing, and I didn't want any more fuss about it. If *your* leg had been in the state mine was in, *you* wouldn't have talked much sense either."

"Thank you," said Brewer, and left without another word.

Trant called Denise again. "I think you'd better not come to-night after all," he said. "The leg's not so good, and I've got a bit of fever. No, nothing much, but I'll turn in early. Oh, and I've fixed the bike—you needn't bother. I'll see you sometime. . . . No, I don't know when. . . . Yes, my dear Denise, I know there are a lot of questions but it's better not to discuss them. In a day or two—I'm ringing off now. 'Bye.'"

Brewer and the Colonel were in conference again, considering the latest bits of evidence that the Superintendent had picked up.

"I feel more certain than ever," said Brewer, "that we were on the right lines when we decided last time that Trant was trying to build an alibi for himself. Take this matter of the bike. If you can believe Trant's explanation for it, you can believe anything—that's what I say. If Trant had been going to the Wycherleys after the walk—and that seems likely enough—the obvious thing for him to do would have been to go home first and wash. He must have been filthy—how could he intend to go visiting, covered with mud and sweat? He would have walked up to the cottage and then telephoned and got Mrs. Wycherley to fetch him in the car. It wouldn't have taken her a couple of minutes. Or else he'd have cycled from the cottage after he'd washed."

"I agree," said Fletcher. "It's a poor story. It's *just* possible, but most unlikely. I doubt if it would impress a jury. Besides, it's clear that he was trying very hard to hide the bike—otherwise he would never have bothered to tell the child to keep quiet about it. Right, suppose we rule out his explanation for the time being and try to follow this thing out logically. What did he want the bike for? What part did it play?"

"Well, sir, whatever it was for, it must have been something to do with the early part of the day. If he'd wanted it for *after* the walk, for any purpose, it would have been quite simple and much more sensible for him to go and get it from the cottage after he'd washed, same as any reasonable human being would have done. And since in fact he didn't behave that way, but left it at the haystack, he could only have done so because he wanted to use it *between* the cottage and the haystack. Down the hill, in fact. All right so far, sir?"

"Yes, that's sound enough. Now let's take it a step further—why would he want to use it down the hill? We've got to consider all possibilities. Perhaps he was trying to cut down his time with the sole object of winning the bet. He couldn't possibly have been sure of winning it otherwise, in spite of what he says."

"You mean it might have been done merely in order to make sure that the fifty guineas to the hospital would be paid by the other man?"

"That's the hypothesis I'm putting up, Super—but it doesn't really appeal to me. That would make him just a common cheat. He doesn't impress me as being that sort of small fry."

"Nor me, sir. Let's get back to where we were. He used the bike down the hill, and his only object could have been to shorten his time."

"To fake his time, if we take the most sinister view of his actions. With a view to some sort of alibi—let's keep that idea in mind. Now, what effect would using the bike have? It would save him five or six minutes, wouldn't it? He'd be that much further on than anyone would expect him to be—say, half a mile. He'd get to the Pool that much early. That means Wycherley wouldn't be there. That means if he walked on he'd expect to meet Wycherley . . ."

"Exactly, sir." Brewer's long jaw stuck out menacingly. "Just about at the mire."

"And that's the only way he *could* have met him there—by saving those few minutes. Except, of course, by cheating, and starting the walk earlier than ten o'clock—and apparently he was very anxious that everyone should know he didn't do that. Hence his visit to the 'Rod and Line'.

Brewer nodded. "That visit to the 'Rod and Line' is so fishy it fairly stinks of alibi. He was too mighty keen to let the landlord know just when he started out. It's the usual thing, sir—first the murderer gets some trustworthy witness to him being at a certain place at a certain time and then he uses some trick to speed up his movements afterwards."

"Good," said the Colonel, "we're making headway. Let's agree that he was trying to fake an alibi, with his starting time pegged and the bike a secret. Now—I know we've been over some of this before but we've got to get it quite clear—for that alibi to be effective the time of death would obviously have to be known to the police, so that he would be able to say, if challenged, 'I couldn't have done the walk in that time, so I couldn't have done the murder.' Then, we'd have gone and timed ourselves over the course and we'd have found that he was right and that he couldn't have done it. But establishing the time of death would be absolutely vital. Now how would he plan to do that?"

"Well," said Brewer, scratching his leg, "the watch was the obvious way, as we agreed when we talked about it before. It's classic, sir. Murder a man, and stop the watch at the time of the murder. Or, in this case perhaps, set the hands even a bit earlier, to strengthen the alibi. It would be a reasonably safe plan, because the watch could be reckoned on to stop directly it got into the mire, anyway, so he'd be perfectly safe to stop it himself before it actually went into the mire."

"Quite," said the Colonel, "and that's what we might have expected. But now we come up against the old difficulty. He *didn't* stop it. According to our reconstruction, he should have, but the fact was it had already stopped, and he left it stopped. Now why did he do that? Let's think this thing out carefully. Let's follow his possible actions. Suppose we are right, and he at least set out with the intention of

first doing the murder and then covering himself with a faked time at the mire. He arrives there, kills Wycherley, and then, when he turns to deal with the watch he finds it's stopped."

"That worries him a good deal, sir. He's simply *got* to establish the time of death, as you said. Otherwise there's no alibi at all. When he sees the hands stopped at 11.10, that shakes him badly."

"No, Super.—remember, we got over that difficulty. Eleven-ten was after Wycherley set out, and as far as Trant knew, no-one else was aware that the watch had stopped. He'd think it had stopped on the moor. He'd just go ahead and alter it to the time he'd originally planned—wouldn't he?"

Brewer agreed. "You'd certainly think so. But, as we saw, the fact is that he didn't."

"And yet, that doesn't make sense. Either our reconstruction is at fault, and he didn't plan any alibi—in which case the bicycle doesn't have any point that I can see—or else he would *certainly* have altered the watch. Think of the risk of *not* altering it . . ."

"That's so, sir. Once we'd become suspicious of foul play, he'd have been the only man with opportunity."

"Exactly. Well, we'll continue to put ourselves in his place. We'll go on the assumption that he *would* alter it. What happens then? He goes home, he reports what he's done to Mrs. Wycherley, of course—then he finds out that other people knew that the watch had stopped. Your friend Crutch, for instance. He finds out that it stopped the night before and not that morning. Now we're getting somewhere. Don't you see, he knows he's altered it and he knows that a search party will be going out for Wycherley at any time. He'd certainly be in a terrible flap at the way he'd left the watch—that would give the whole show away. So someone goes back afterwards, pulls the body out, re-sets the watch, and makes the mistakes that we discovered. The tampering with the watch and with the body is explained."

"And Trant couldn't have gone back with that leg," said Brewer.

"Quite—so the person who went back must have been Mrs. Wycherley."

"That's it," said Brewer. "She was out on the moors for five or six hours, a thing she'd never dreamed of doing before in her life. She went out alone, instead of doing the obvious thing and getting some help. She came back with her clothes all over black mud—even her beret—and she took steps right away to get them cleaned up. It was just an accidental conversation with Betty that gave me a line on that. What's more, sir, it's far likelier that she made those mistakes than that Trant did. He's a cool customer—and she'd be in a fine old state in that weather and doing a job like she was doing."

"Yes—but, my God, what a horrible thought it is. Pulling your murdered husband out of the mire and pushing him back again! She must have a heart of granite. But, by heavens, it fits in. She's the beneficiary under the will, and there's enough money to make a life-sized motive all right. It's the old story—he does the murder, she

helps him, and they both benefit. He's probably her lover, though we've no evidence—we must work on that. Yes, it fits in all right."

"A lot of other things fit in, too," said Brewer. "Her sudden doubts about whether the walk was a good idea, after they'd discovered at the hotel that the watch had stopped. That means she knew all about the plans, if it means anything. What a devil—but I must say she's a good actress. Well, sir, what do we do? Can we go ahead with the arrests?"

The Colonel sat sunk in thought. "The case seems complete to me," he said. "Just let's take a broad look at it. First, we have to establish that a murder took place. The evidence is, negatively, that an accident was most improbable, and positively, that someone tampered with the body after it had been in the mire. All right, that seems good enough to me. As to motive, it's only too obvious—money. Money for Trant who doesn't have any, and more money for Mrs. Wycherley who hasn't got enough. Opportunity?—we can certainly show that Trant had the opportunity. He admits that he was on the moor within a few hundred yards of the scene. We can also establish a reasonable probability that no one else had the opportunity. Then, we have evidence that Trant and Mrs. Wycherley knew each other well, and that she visited him several times during the crucial day. We have evidence, or something very like it, of a plot between the two to fake times. We have evidence that Mrs. Wycherley was out on the moor at a time when the body was tampered with, that no one else could have done it, and that she came back in the hell of a mess with the right sort of mud on her. It's a tricky case, but I don't see much room for reasonable doubt and I can't see Mrs. Wycherley standing up to a gruelling in the witness box with the evidence we've got. What we haven't got is the psychological background. We don't know anything to speak of about either Trant or Mrs. Wycherley. We don't know anything about their origins. I'll tell you what—I'll run up to Town first thing in the morning, and put the facts before the Yard. Perhaps they'll be able to get some information about our suspects. Then, if it looks all right and they approve, we'll go ahead."

Brewer nodded. "Trant can't run away—that leg of his ties him to the cottage."

"Mrs. Wycherley has a car, don't forget," said the Colonel. "Better get one of your constables to keep a discreet eye on her. But I don't see why they should try to get away—we've not done much to make them suspicious."

"Trant seemed a little upset when I called the second time to-day," said Brewer. "Kind of resentful. He's bound to think we're sceptical about his bicycle story. Still, it should be all right till you come back."

The Colonel got up. "If we pull this off," he said, "it'll do you a lot of good, Superintendent. And I must say you'll have deserved it."

"Thank you, sir," said Brewer, "but I don't like crossing bridges before they're hatched."



The Colonel had one more call to make and it gave him no pleasure. He could no longer look upon Denise as a charming young woman and a pleasant neighbour. He was even a little uneasy about the ethics of his visit. He greeted her gravely with a little inclination of his head as she rose to meet him from her deckchair and cushions in the garden.

"Thank you," he said, refusing a seat, "but I can't stay more than a few moments. Mrs. Wycherley, I'm afraid I still have to ask questions. One or two little things have arisen in connection with Henry's death which make it necessary. About yourself, for instance. I wonder if you'd mind telling me where you were born?"

Denise, startled and gripped with new anxiety, still managed to feign wide-eyed innocence. "Why, of course, Colonel—it's no secret. Though I really can't see what bearing it can have on your inquiries. I was born at Tromso, in Norway."

"Aha! Can you tell me the exact address?"

Denise faltered. Again these impossible questions. Suppose she invented an address—he could so easily find out. She said "It's so long ago, I'm afraid I've forgotten. I was only a little girl when I left, you know."

"How old?"

"About four."

"I see. Well, it doesn't really matter—they're bound to have kept records of the birth in Tromso and I can easily get them by telegraph."

Denise gasped. "But—oh——" She stopped. She could see no way out of this. There *was* no way out. What was the good of her going on lying when they could check her statements? It was dangerous, too—if they believed she was trying to hide things, it would merely make them more determined to ransack her past.

The Colonel watched her narrowly. "Mrs. Wycherley," he said, "I hesitate to appear to doubt you at all,—but—er—I suppose this is true about Tromso?"

Denise began to cry, or at least to make noises and dab her eyes. "I don't know what right you've got to ask me these questions," she sobbed. "Why can't you let me alone?"

Fletcher was unimpressed. "You're a grown-up woman," he said shortly. "All I'm asking you is where you were born. You're not compelled to answer if you don't want to and you're not even compelled to tell the truth—though it's advisable, if only because we can find out from other sources. If you're trying to hide something, I can only say that in your own interest it would be better not to."

Denise put her handkerchief back in her bag and her eyes snapped. "All right," she said, making a virtue of a frankness which she couldn't avoid, "I'll tell you the truth. I've done nothing wrong and I'm not ashamed to tell you. I wasn't born in Norway. I made that up. I was born in a London slum—a place that all my life I've been trying to forget. Bolt Street, if you want to know, near Kings Cross Station. Number thirteen, Bolt Street. I was a slum child. I decided to get out of it. I found myself a job. I worked hard in an office. Then

I got a better job—a job as a model with Jones & Nicholls. I lived with a man, and he gave me some money. I went to the Riviera and met Henry. He wanted to marry me. I thought that if I'd told him I'd been born in a slum, he wouldn't have done. So I invented the story about Tromso."

"I see," said the Colonel, gravely. "What about your marriage certificate—are all the facts on that invented?"

Denise looked scared again. "Yes, a lot of them, I'm afraid. Henry would have known. I invented an address and a fictitious father and mother."

Fletcher nodded. "That's an offence, of course—though perhaps, in the circumstances, a minor one. What was your maiden name?"

"Waters. I was christened Daisy, but I changed it to Denise when I got the job as a model."

"Thank you," said Fletcher. "I think that's all just now."

"What are you going to do about it?" cried Denise. "You're not going to tell people?"

"You can rely on me not to gossip," said the Colonel stiffly. "Good morning." The interview had proved even more unpleasant than he had expected. Could a woman be so lovely and yet so bad? He left the house with a creepy feeling in his spine and a strong desire for fresh air.

## CHAPTER 17

NEXT morning the Chief Constable took the first train to Town and before lunch he was putting his cards on the Assistant Commissioner's table. The A.C. listened with the closest attention while Fletcher recounted what seemed to him a most remarkable story.

"Well," said the A.C. when he'd finished, "that's just about as cold-blooded a plot as ever I've heard of. The evidence is all circumstantial, of course, but it's good. It would be a tricky case to take to court, but I think we should try to do it. I'll get advice on that this afternoon. Everything would depend on the behaviour of Trant and the woman in the box, presuming they elected to give evidence, and on the jury. You say the woman's lovely—that might help her, but she'd have a devil of a lot of explaining to do. It's a fascinating story. My God, what a bitch she must be. I agree with you we ought to get more information about your suspects." He rang a bell. "And we ought to be able to prove immoral relationship with a bit of probing. Ah, Flinders, just see if we've got anything on either of these people, will you . . .?"

"I think it's very probable," said the Colonel, "that Mrs. Wycherley would break down under arrest if she were confronted with all the evidence we have. She's very tough up to a point, as you may imagine—wonderful actress and lots of poise—but I detect signs of cracking

nerves this last day or two. It's not surprising, either, considering what she must have gone through."

The A.C. slowly shook his head. "The strain must be fearful. Has she been mixing with people much since the affair—behaving normally?"

"No, she's been staying in mostly. She never had very many friends—not real friends. Ah, here's your man."

The officer who had answered the bell returned with a smile of satisfaction on his face. "Nothing on the woman, sir, but plenty on the man." And he laid a sheaf of papers on the Chief's desk.

The A.C. perused them with care. "Fletcher," he said, "I bet you're right. We've got Trant on the files here. Is that him?" He passed a photograph across the table.

"That's the man," said the Colonel. "Unmistakable. Sinister face."

"Well," said the A.C., "he was sentenced to two years penal servitude in 1937 for forging a cheque. Skilful bit of work, apparently, but he was too cocksure. No excuse—good family background, minor public school and university. Bad college record—some trouble with a girl. He seems to have been a cool, tough, unscrupulous sort of character. Plenty of brains—fits your case perfectly. Very good R.A.F. record, incidentally—that would help him, but I doubt if the defence would dare to raise the question of character. Well, that's that."

"Pity there's nothing on Mrs. Wycherley," said the Colonel. "We'll have to do some work on her. I wonder if you could send a good man down to Bolt Street to collect all the early stuff about her—of course, it's more than ten years ago, so the trail may be a bit cold, but there are bound to be people who remember her. Perhaps your man could follow her activities as far as Jones & Nicholls. I'll start at Jones & Nicholls—I have a hunch that's where she began to get interesting."

"I'll do that with pleasure," said the A.C. "And let me know later how you get on."

. . . . .

The Colonel felt young and brisk. He was no longer oppressed by the knowledge that a lovely girl had helped in an abominable murder—he was determined to see that she got her deserts and he was quite enjoying the prospect of doing a little sleuthing on his own.

He called on the manager of Jones & Nicholls and explained his business. The manager introduced him to a Mrs. Fenby, who had apparently taken over the duties of Mrs. Travers, manageress of the model department at the time that the Colonel was enquiring about.

Mrs. Fenby was willing to help. She had been a model herself, apparently, at the time when Denise was in the shop, and remembered her perfectly. She told the Colonel at great length every detail that she could remember about Denise's appearance and work and habits, but what she actually knew was disappointingly slight. Denise had

kept herself to herself. She had flaunted no boy friends, and when she had left she had given no explanation. She had just gone, and that was all. She had been a most secretive person about her life.

After a long talk, the Colonel realized that he could get no further and went back to the Yard. It was late in the evening when a report came in from the officer who'd been to Bolt Street.

His name was Jackson, and he was alert and smart. He'd worked fast and covered a lot of ground. Daisy Waters was still remembered in Bolt Street, he said. Her father was dead, but her mother was still living at number thirteen. So was a sister, Olive. They'd asked a few questions about her, and then he'd asked a great many. He gave a brief but vivid account of the sort of life Daisy Waters had led at Kings Cross. From there he'd gone on to a film office in Wardour Street and seen a Mr. Lyons—a nice fellow who'd lost an arm in the war. Mr. Lyons had been very helpful and friendly and had filled in a number of blanks. He'd also given him the address of the room in Russell Square where Daisy Waters had lived. Jackson had traced the landlady, who'd moved to Highgate, and the landlady had told him that Daisy Waters had had a boy friend. She didn't know his full name—never had known it—but he used to drive up in a very expensive-looking car and take her out. She once heard the girl call him 'William' as she stood outside by the car. He was a rather good-looking man, big and broad, very self-confident, and wore well-cut clothes.

"That seemed a bit vague," Jackson admitted. "I tried to get some more facts. It looked hopeless and then I had a stroke of luck. The landlady's son came in—he's just been demobbed from the R.A.F. An aero engine mechanic. He joined in the conversation. Apparently he was one of those young fellows who go crazy about cars at the age of eighteen or so. He'd managed to have a look around that car, and had never forgotten its details. He gave me the make—Alanda; the colour, the type, the horse-power, everything. He said he'd dreamed ever since of having one like it. He said it was one of the finest bits of machinery that had ever been put on the market."

"Go on," said the A.C.

"Well, sir, that Alanda model isn't a mass production job. Every car that's turned out is remembered by the firm as you'd remember the features of your own child. I called on Alandas and went through their records. It was dead easy—they spotted it at once. There were only three 'Williams' who'd bought that model that year, and two of them didn't answer the description at all. One of them did. And here's his name and address."

. . . . .

William Pargeter sat in the lounge of Colonel Fletcher's club, drinking whiskey and water and smoking a cigar. The Colonel was also smoking a cigar and looked very comfortable. The appointment had been made quite simply. He had rung Pargeter the night before at his Upshire home and expressed an urgent desire to meet him. Pargeter

had said he was running up to Town next day in any case and the Colonel had invited him to lunch at the club. And here they were.

"Well," said Pargeter, "that was a good lunch, Colonel. I hope I haven't bored you with all that talk about the Good Fellowship Estate. Now tell me, what's on your mind?"

"Did you ever know a woman called Denise Waters?" said Fletcher.

Pargeter—an older, flabbier, ruddier Pargeter—paled. "My God!" he said. He put down his glass. "Why do you ask?"

The Colonel smiled faintly. "Look here, Pargeter," he said, "I'd like to make it plain that I'm not trying to stir up your past. Speaking as man to man, we've most of us got a past. I'm not interested in your relationship with her and nothing will come out about it. I merely want to find out something about her."

William looked profoundly relieved. "In that case, I'll tell you. Frankly, it was a shock—I'm quite a figure in Upshire, you know—chairman of the Bench, and all that. Wouldn't like old peccadilloes to leak out. But tell me, why do you want to know?"

"She's in bad trouble," said Fletcher. "Got herself into it."

William snorted. "I'm not surprised," he said. "I met her at Jones & Nicholls one afternoon—let's see, ten or eleven years ago. She's a beauty—maybe you know that. I dated her up. Took her out a bit. We got on well, so I gave her an allowance and a nice flat in Piccadilly. I saw a lot of her. Unfortunately, I tripped up. She was going to have a child."

The Colonel nodded encouragingly.

"Well—off the record, you know—we fixed that. She didn't have it. Then she blackmailed me. Just straight blackmail. Five thousand pounds, or I'll tell your wife—just like that."

The Colonel gave a low whistle. "And you paid?"

"I had to. I'd have been ruined. She said she was going off to the Riviera to start life afresh. The one thing I can say to her credit is that she's never bothered me since. Probably she didn't dare."

"She didn't need to," said the Colonel. "I can tell you the end of the story. She met a rich man in France and married him."

"She would. I don't like making innuendoes about a woman's character, but she was a money-grubbing little bitch!"

"She certainly seems to have been unscrupulous. Did you know anything about her origins?"

William thought back. "Don't think I did," he said. "Can't remember, anyway."

"She was a slum child," said Fletcher, "and not happy about it. She wanted to get rich the quick way. I've been piecing her story together these past two days. First a squalid home in Kings Cross, then a shorthand typist's job in Wardour Street, then a job as a model at the shop where you met her, then your flat in Piccadilly, then the Riviera, and always on the look out for easy money. Cold, calculating, hard as nails, beautiful, utterly selfish . . ."

"That's Denise all right. Well, Colonel, how does all this arise? What trouble has she got into? More blackmail?"

"Worse," said the Colonel. He hesitated. "Her husband has . . . died."

"I say," said William, slowly. He stared thoughtfully at the ash of his cigar. "I'm sorry. I've often wondered what would happen to her in the end."

. . . . .

"That settles it," said the A.C. "We'll go ahead. As I see it, there's not a shadow of doubt that murder was done and that they did it. It's not absolutely certain that we can prove it to the satisfaction of a jury, but we must try."

"I'll go back straight away," said the Colonel, "and we'll make the arrests to-night. Trant's an ugly customer—there may be fire-works. I'll let you know what happens. Thanks for all your help. Goodbye."

As soon as Fletcher got back to Okecombe he called at the Superintendent's office and told him all that he'd found out. Brewer listened stolidly, nodding occasionally, and finally said: "Beautiful or not, she's a most unpleasant woman. But you can't be surprised. What's bred in the bone comes out in the wash, that's what I say."

. . . . .

Denise was becoming frail with anxiety. She felt certain after the Colonel's last visit that something had gone wrong. His whole attitude to her had changed. There had been nothing at all of the friendly neighbour in his demeanour. And why was he interested in her place of birth? What had that got to do with her husband's accidental death on the moors? But he *was* interested, and he would probably start raking up the past now to see what he could find. He would probably find plenty. Since her early days, she had covered her tracks as best she could, but she knew that a determined investigation would soon expose them.

The more she thought over the situation, the more she worried. Her nerves were on edge and she could settle down to nothing. She felt unbearably lonely and miserable. It was two days since Charles had spoken to her so brusquely on the 'phone, and she had heard no further word from him. It was ridiculous—as though they could give anything away simply by meeting. They were known to be friends—why shouldn't she go and see him? Finally, in desperation, she rang him up.

"I *must* see you," she cried into the receiver, her voice barely under control. "I'm so wretched, Charles—I shall go crazy."

He gave in. "All right," he said. "Come up this evening. Goodbye."

When she arrived at Rosemary Cottage just after seven, she was relieved to find that he didn't seem angry.

"I'm sorry," she said, clinging to him and shaking a little. "I just couldn't stay alone another minute."

"That's all right," said Trant. "Have a drink—it'll do you good. I warned you that you'd have to be tough for a day or two. You

have worked yourself into a state, haven't you?" He looked at her dark-ringed eyes and pale cheeks with concern. "Damn it, I've been a fool. It would have been better to let you come. But I was worried that they might link us up too much. And those telephone calls give me the jitters—it's quite possible they listen in to all our conversations." He took a drink himself. "What's the news, anyway?"

"Oh, Charles, I'm terrified. I can't sleep, I can't think. These questions they keep on asking me."

"What questions, exactly?"

"Oh, questions about my walk on the moors and about Henry's watch and even where I was born."

Trant stared at her. "Good God," he said slowly. He poured himself out a fresh tot of whisky, added a splash of soda, and drained it. "That's extraordinary. They've been damned inquisitive with me, too. They found the bicycle, you know, and they obviously didn't believe my explanation. Can't say I blame them, either. That was bad luck about the bike. All the same . . ."

"They suspect us," Denise said, sitting down on the divan and shivering slightly. "I know they do, Charles. Colonel Fletcher was so cold when he called two days ago—just as though he *knew*. He's never been like that before. Now they know about Bolt Street, they'll find out everything about me."

"Yes," said Trant, puffing hard at a cigarette, "that won't help certainly. And if they're suspicious, they'll look up my record, too. Hell, I can't understand this. I just don't see what's gone wrong. What could have made them suspicious? Why couldn't they take the incident at its face value and accept it as an accident. It damned well looked like an accident. Maybe it's just routine. They probably can't believe that Henry would have fallen in the mire on his own—that must be all they've got to work on and their scepticism wouldn't carry any weight in a court. We'll be all right if we stand pat on our story—it's a good story and they can't prove murder. That's the vital thing. Thank heavens you went back and altered the watch."

"That's what I thought," said Denise, "but they keep on asking about the watch—at least, they asked about it once. About whether I knew it had stopped and when it stopped and so on."

"Let's hope that's routine, too," said Trant. "I still say they can't prove murder. They found a body in a mire and they don't believe it fell in accidentally but they've nothing to go on. Everything we did, from beginning to end, can be reasonably explained, apart from the bike, and if they've suspicions about that they've no proof of anything. As long as we stick to our story we're okay. No jury would convict on suspicion, and if that's all they've got to go on they'll never bring a case. You mark my words, in a few days' time it'll all blow over. The inquest's to-morrow, isn't it?"

"Yes, it was postponed."

"Well, I bet you anything there'll be a verdict of 'accidental death' to-morrow and that'll end-the whole thing. Cheer up, and have

another drink." He limped over to the divan and put his arm round her. "We'll still have fun," he said. "Don't worry."

They sat in silence for a while. It was a gloomy evening—very different from their earlier passionate encounters. Neither of them felt in the mood for love-making.

"I wish we hadn't done it," said Denise. "It wasn't worth it. It seemed so easy but I haven't had a quiet moment since. I suppose it's conscience."

Trant said grimly: "Don't kid yourself; it's fear." It was a flash of his old self—he'd been feeling the strain, too. "It'll seem worth while when we're out of the wood, and not until." He sat still, thinking.

"It's odd about that watch, all the same," he said presently. "Why should they ask you about that? They found the watch. It was stopped at 11.10. That was all quite proper—so it should have been. They checked up on that. Why should they worry about it?"

Suddenly a fearful thought flashed through his mind. "Denise," he said, clutching her arm so that she cried out, "you didn't bungle that watch business, did you? You're sure you set the hands at 11.10—not some other time?"

Denise whimpered. "Of course I'm sure. Don't, you're hurting. That's what I went for, wasn't it?"

He released her arm. "Sorry, it was just an idea." He lay back, but there was still a deep line between his brows. In a moment he was up again. "Denise," he said, "tell me exactly what you did when you altered the watch. Every detail. From the time you fished out the body?"

Denise groaned. "Oh, Charles, need we go over all that again. It's torture. I can't bear it. Why don't you let me alone? I'm so tired. Please!"

Trant was adamant. "I must know," he said. "It's important. I'm not doing it just for fun. Tell me."

His personality towered over hers. She said softly: "Well, it was raining. I pulled on the arm that was sticking out and it began to come out. When the rucksack showed, I put the rope you gave me under the strap and hauled on that. The body came out with a horrible plop. Oh dear, must I go on?"

"Yes," said Trant.

"It turned over on its side and looked at me. At least, it *seemed* to be looking. I . . . I screamed. The face was so black and there was a horrible slimy bit of weed all over it."

"So the body was really turned over on its face, with the head up towards you and the watch arm on your right?"

Denise thought. "Yes," she said, "that's right."

"Okay," said Trant, "I'll be the body." He hunched himself on the divan towards her. "Now what?"

"I took the watch off."

"You took it off? Whatever for?"

"The wrist was bent—I couldn't get at the winding knob."



"I see. Well, take it off." She unfastened it from his left wrist with trembling hands.

"This comes off more easily," she said. "The other was wet and shrunk—I had an awful job with it. I—I dropped it. I had a terrible fright. I thought I'd lost it altogether. You can't imagine what it was like. You ought never to have let me do it." She was crying now.

"So you dropped it. Damn! I suppose it went back with mud underneath it and they found the mud."

"No, it didn't," cried Denise, suddenly eager, through her tears. "I swear it didn't. I remember wiping it, most carefully. It was quite light, and I could see everything. I set the hands, exactly as you'd told me. Then I put it back. I can see it exactly. His wrist was lying just as yours is, bent inwards across his body, between me and him."

"Go on," said Trant. "Put it on."

With fingers that still fumbled, Denise put the watch back on his wrist. Trant stared at it. Denise stared at it.

"And you put it on just like that?" said Trant in a voice that was so low it was hardly more than a whisper.

"Yes," said Denise. "Exactly like that." Suddenly light pierced her mind and she drew back from the settee in an attitude of terror, her face distorted. "Oh, God," she moaned. "I put it on the wrong way round. Oh, God!" She threw herself down and her body was racked with sobs as she gave herself up to utter despair.

Trant took a deep breath and got up. "Yes," he said, "you put it on the wrong way round. You put it on the way you'd have put it on your own wrist." There was no accusation in his voice—just a plain statement of fact. He poured himself another drink—a larger one—and drank it neat.

Denise suddenly turned on him. "I couldn't help it—I was so upset, I didn't think. You shouldn't have sent me. It's all your fault—everything's your fault. It was your idea."

"Have a drink," said Trant. "You're going to need it. I'm not blaming you. I think you did pretty well. It was just bad luck. It was a gamble, and we lost. That's all there is to it."

Denise was frantic again. "What do you mean, lost?" she cried. "We can't lose. *We musn't.*"

"We have," said Trant. "I'm sorry, my dear. The simple fact is that we're as good as hanged, and now we've got to face it."

## CHAPTER 18

DENISE sat slumped on the divan, her head in her hands, staring at the floor. All her beauty had left her. Her face was grey with tiredness and misery. She felt utterly worn-out.

Trant had gone over to his own chair and made himself comfortable with his leg up on another chair and the whisky bottle beside him. By contrast he looked almost cheerful.

"There must be some way out," Denise whispered after a moment or two.

"All right," said Trant, "you think of one." He spoke in a level controlled voice, with no more emotion than if he'd been seeking suggestions for a crossword puzzle.

"I can't think," said Denise. "That's the trouble. I haven't been able to think for days. Ever since we—we did it. The whole thing looked so simple to start with, and then when they began asking questions my mind kept on going blank."

Trant nodded sympathetically. "I can understand. I was wrong to think you had the temperament to make a good accomplice in a job like this. You were icy cool in your own little plots and plans when everything was going all right and I made the mistake of thinking you'd be good in a crisis. But you're not really. You did your best, but now your nerve's gone. It's quite natural. Most people would be the same."

Denise broke out again in anger. "I wish you wouldn't sit there looking so horribly cool. Why don't you *do* something?"

"My dear girl, there's nothing to do. Just look at the situation now, quite judicially. When you put that watch back upside down, you told the police as plainly as though you'd spoken it into their ear: 'This man has been murdered.' Henry's body had been interfered with after death—and nobody would have done that except a murderer. Very well. The next question the police ask themselves is—Who did the murder? You must agree, the field of choice is limited. There are no indications whatever that anyone else was on the moor except myself. In that case, I did it. Everything else fits in. I did it to get Henry's money and therefore you must have been in it too. And they knew you were in it—right up to the neck—because of your walk on the moor alone and lots of other things."

"But I didn't do it! I didn't kill him—you did it. You persuaded me to help. It's been you all the time. All I did was carry out your instructions."

Trant looked at her with hard contempt. "If you can wriggle out of it, my dear, good luck to you. You can't do me any harm now. I don't envy you your spell in the witness box, though. You'll have to make yourself a good deal more charming than you look now to get away with it. You were an accessory before, during and after the fact. You played your part very skilfully—er—up to a point—in what was obviously a well-thought-out plot. You were, in short, my willing accomplice. For being an accomplice in wilful murder the penalty is death. But, of course, if you can persuade the jury that you fell under the fascination of my evil spell and are really a good woman at heart, you may get off with a life sentence. Personally, that wouldn't attract me as a prospect."

"Can't we get away?" cried Denise.

"I can't," said Trant.

"I could take you in the car," said Denise.

Trant sipped his whiskey and shook his head. "In the first place I should be far too conspicuous. Directly the hue and cry was out, I'd be picked up at once. In the second place, I don't really fancy the life of a fugitive. It can't be very pleasant to be wanted for murder—to know that for the whole of the rest of your existence you've got to hide, to creep about, to be afraid. That's no fun. But you try it, by all means, if you think it's worth it. I imagine, though, the police are probably keeping an eye on us already and I doubt if you'll get much beyond the bottom of the lane. Have you got a passport?"

"No," said Denise, "it expired during the war and I haven't had it renewed."

"There you are, then. You'd never get abroad. The police are terribly efficient, you know. I shouldn't be at all surprised if they came to arrest us to-night. The best thing you can do is to let me fill your glass with this excellent whiskey and then let me make love to you. It's a long while, my dear Denise, since we had high jinks on the divan."

"You've drunk too much already," said Denise. "How can you talk of making love at a time like this? Oh, I do wish I'd never met you."

"That's almost where I came in," said Trant. "There could be no better time than this for lovemaking. It's true your face isn't very attractive just now but your body is as luscious as ever."

"What a beast you are!" said Denise. "I loathe you."

"I don't believe it. Anyway, it doesn't really matter. It'll be all the same in a few hours time. We might just as well spend the little while that's left to us pleasantly. Let me come over and stroke you."

"I don't want you, I tell you."

Trant sighed. "I expect I could soon make you want me, but I really don't think it's worth the trouble. When you come to think of it, we haven't really got very much out of our acquaintanceship have we? A good deal more promise than performance, I'd say. A bit of fun and a lot of worry. Too bad it turned out like that. Do have another drink."

"No, I tell you, no! What's the good of getting drunk?" She beat her hands against her knees in futile anger. "Why do you just *sit* there? You take it so calmly—I can't understand it. We must do *something*."

"We shall," said Trant. He got up awkwardly from the low chair and hobbled over to the cupboard. Denise couldn't see what he'd taken out but he brought it back and put it on the table next to the whiskey bottle and then she saw.

"No!" she cried.

"Yes," said Trant. "Of course. In a very little while, now, I expect to hear the noise of a car driving up the hill or round the corner from the pub. I may be wrong, of course—it may come to-

morrow, not to-day. But I think it'll come to-day. When it does, I shall take this revolver, put it into my mouth, and fire a bullet into my head. Then I shall have no more worries at all. It's just as easy as all that."

"You wouldn't do it," she said, but without conviction.

Trant became a little more human. "Look, Denise, be sensible. This is the simplest way out, by far. For your own sake, consider the two alternatives for us. If we just sit here, and wait to be taken, we shall have weeks of waiting and questioning and living in a most uncomfortable prison cell. Then there'll be all the wretched useless business of a trial, with all the cards against us. We shall have to stand in the box before crowds of people who'll enjoy watching us tie ourselves up into knots under questioning. Probably all your history will be dragged out, and you'll be shown up before the world as an adventuress, a gold-digger, a murderess. And it'll all be for nothing. Whatever we go through, it won't have any effect whatever on the result of the trial. We shall both be found guilty. Probably we shall both be sentenced to death—with all the foolery of black caps and cheap drama. I shall have to sit in my cell alone for several weeks with nothing to do, nothing to think about, nothing to hope for, just waiting for the morning when they'll take me out and hang me. You'll be sitting alone waiting to see if your sentence will be commuted to life imprisonment. It'll be agony for you—hope and fear, hope and fear, all the time. In the end you may still have to face the drop in the early morning, and if you don't you'll have a worse fate. You'll grow old and grey in a cell. You'll lose all your beauty and vitality, and your life will just dribble away, useless, worthless. What's the point?"

"Something might turn up," Denise whispered. "You can never be sure. Once you're dead, you're dead. It's all over then. I don't want to die. They can't kill me, like that. I can't believe it."

"You killed Henry—at least, you helped to. It was a gamble, Denise, and we've lost. I don't regret it—if we'd won it would have been well worth while. But it's no good whining now. Hell, it's nothing, just to die." He picked up the revolver and balanced it in his hand. "We're lucky to have this wonderful product of civilization to help us out. Think, if you were an Ancient Briton, how difficult it would be to put an end to your life. Suffocating yourself in water or hacking away at your flesh with a stone axe, or trying to get eaten up by a wild beast! We can do it neatly and quickly. Heavens, everyone has to die. Think of the millions and millions of people who've just died in the war. Why, I must have killed thousands myself."

"You're so callous." She was crouching back on the divan so that she seemed only half her normal size and her grey face seemed detached from her body among the shadows.

"I know I'm callous, but you're worse, you're a coward. You'll suffer more in the end—far more. Don't you see I'm trying to help you. You're so weak—I'm trying to give you a little strength. We

botched our plans and that was mainly my fault—now I'm trying to play fair and make up for it in the only way I can."

"If you'd ever loved me," said Denise, "you'd never talk like this."

"If I'd ever loved you," said Trant, "I would kill you myself. I ought to. I will if you like."

She shrank back, terrified.

"Don't worry," he said. "I won't. I never have loved you—as you know. And I don't really care what happens to you. But I like things to end in a tidy and dignified way. Pity! Have another drink." He poured out two fingers.

"You know," he went on, "it must be terrible to believe in a life after this life. You'd think one would be enough for most people. I'm not troubled that way. I don't worry about any judgment. I don't worry about good and evil. Why should I? I've nothing to lose, nothing to gain. Look at the Nazis—they had a fine old fling for their money, enjoyed their power, didn't care about morality, and in the end most of them were just shot. Much more comfortable than being run over by a bus, which might happen to any good Christian. And now they're dead and comfortable, the same as I'll be in a few minutes. Just dead flesh, without thoughts or feelings. After everything they did—after torturing hundreds of thousands of people. And then idiots babble about right and wrong. It's silly—don't you agree?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Denise, cowering.

"Of course you don't. You're a feather-brained creature. You've never been able to think beyond your immediate desires, have you? You wanted money and you went out to get it, but you couldn't take the consequences. If you're going to be really ruthless and selfish in this world, my girl, you've got to have a philosophy behind you."

He was beginning to get pretty drunk and sat motionless in his chair. As he became more fuddled, Denise's brain seemed to clear. One by one, she again went over in her mind all the possible alternatives of action, and one by one she rejected them. Even if there had been any means of physical escape, she felt too worn out to take it. Escape would mean quick action, skilful planning and a real will to live. She had said she didn't want to die, but she felt she didn't want to live either—not the way she would have to. She hadn't a single friend in the whole world. Life had been very cruel to her—she had deserved something better than this. After all, she had tried to lift herself out of the slums, she had tried to improve her position. She had done nothing really wrong until she had met Trant. Even William had been in a position to pay. She had simply been weak with Trant. She hated him now. He was a monster, without human feelings.

She loathed this cottage now. It was a terrifying place, with its heavy beams and its dark shadows and the great silence of the moor that enveloped it. She wished she was dead. Henry was luckier than she was.

Suddenly Trant swayed to his feet. "To hell with this!" he cried. "I'm tired of waiting for the bastards." He picked up the gun and lurched over to the divan.

"One more kiss before I go, or not?" he said, rocking on his heels.

"Go away—oh, go away. I can't bear it. I shall go crazy. Oh, God!"

"Weakling!" said Trant. "Miserable cringing worm! Little white grub with a yellow head! Shall I kill you? Shall I?"

"Please—no—no!" Denise could hardly speak, but the cottage was so silent that the sibilant whisper was as clear as a shout.

Trant stood over her. "Have it your own way," he said. "I hope you enjoy watching me. Goodbye, Denise, my sweet." He gave a little mocking laugh and put the barrel of the revolver in his mouth.

Denise crouched and screamed and Trant, reeling, pulled the trigger. She went on screaming, high and piercing above the sound of the explosion. She saw all the side of Trant's face fall away in blood and ragged flesh. His great body swung around and he crashed to the floor beside the divan.

She saw that he wasn't dead. He was writhing in agony, his legs kicking and scraping on the wooden floor under the divan. There was a growing pool of blood. He seemed to be still half-conscious and kept groaning. Her screaming died away. She couldn't bear to look at him, couldn't bear anything. She would go mad. She wanted to rush away, out, anywhere to get away from this endless nightmare, this ghastly bloody horror of pain and torment. And yet she couldn't leave him. One of his eyes was undamaged and it opened and looked at her. She knew that he wanted her to kill him. She couldn't. She couldn't do anything.

Suddenly she became aware of a noise outside. A car was climbing the hill, climbing fast with a great roar. It would be here in a moment. This must be the police—coming for them. Coming to take her away and shut her up, alone, with all these pictures in her mind—Henry's black face with the weeds trailing over it and Trant twitching in his blood and the gallows and a rope round her neck. The car stopped—there were footsteps now outside. Only seconds were left to her. She reached for the gun on the floor and put it to her head. She meant to kill herself, but the picture of Trant's face was too vivid. She had her finger on the trigger and thought she was pressing it but she wasn't pressing it. She couldn't press it. She couldn't do it. She fell sobbing to the floor and the door swung open.

Brewer gave one quick look round and put his own gun back in his pocket. "Better see to him," he said sharply to a constable, indicating Trant. The Chief Constable stood by, grimly surveying the scene.

Brewer jerked Denise to her feet and got her into a chair. She was a ghastly sight, gasping and drooling with fear.

Brewer's gaunt features showed no trace of pity. "Denise Wycherley," he said slowly, "You are charged with being an accessory in the wilful murder of your husband Henry Wycherley, on Dartmoor

on the morning of July 18th of this year, and it's my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence."

Denise got up and tottered towards him. "It's true," she whispered. "I did it. He made me. I'll tell you everything. Oh, say they won't hang me. Colonel Fletcher, you won't let them hang me . . ."

"Take her away," said Fletcher curtly. "And send an ambulance." The constable took her away.

"Trant's still alive," said Brewer, bending over him. "Half his face and jaw is gone but he's breathing. Looks like he bungled the job. Nothing we can do till the doc. comes."

They went to the door of the cottage and stood at the entrance, smoking. In a few minutes the ambulance came tearing up the hill and the police surgeon, MacIntosh, jumped out with an assistant.

"Your man's inside on the floor," said the Colonel. The surgeon and the ambulance driver went in. The driver had a stretcher. Presently they came out again and pushed Trant into the ambulance.

"He's made a nasty mess of himself," said the doctor, "but he's as strong as an ox. My guess is that he'll live."

"Not for long, he won't," said Brewer, grimly.

. . . . .

The Chief Constable drove the Superintendent slowly back to the police station. "Well, Super," he said, as they slid gently down the hill, "that seems to clean the case up all right."

Brewer nodded. "She'll talk. She'll tell everything. My God, though, what a sight. You know, sir, I don't think murder's a good idea."

"You don't, Super?"

"No, sir. Just think what a time those two must have had in that cottage to-night. Not to mention what's ahead of them."

"She was a lovely woman," said the Colonel. "One of the loveliest I've ever seen. I expect she'll try and make the jury sorry for her."

"She'd never make *me* sorry for her," said the Superintendent. "She's buttered her bread and now she's got to lie on it, that's what I say."

END

•







**AIDE-de-CAMP'S LIBRARY**

---

*Accn. No.* 772 ...

1. Books may be retained for a period not exceeding fifteen days.